

**“I Am Cone Sold Stober”:
Challenges of Translating the Humor of Diana Wynne Jones’s
Howl’s Moving Castle into Japanese**

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Abstract

*In the field of Translation Studies, humor is considered to be one of the most challenging aspects of interlingual translation, its ephemeral essence often being difficult to preserve in another language—in particular if the languages in question are as dissimilar as English and Japanese. This study focuses on Junko Nishimura’s Japanese translation of Diana Wynne Jones’s British fantasy novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986), demonstrating how the language-bound and culture-specific humor of the original text underwent a circumspect re-rendering to conform to Japanese language conventions and target-readership expectations. The paper pursues the double objective of widening the scope of research into the Japanese translations of Diana Wynne Jones’s compositions and initiating a more constructive discussion of why “verbal humour travels badly” (Chiaro, 2010, p. 1) across Anglophone and Japanese cultures. A discussion of linguistic and cultural differences followed by an analysis of Jones’s humor characteristics constitute the theoretical part of the study, while an empirical analysis of the translation methods used by Nishimura to render different comical devices of the novel comprises the practical part.*

1. Introduction

Although the problem of interlingual translation of humor¹ has been covered in sufficient detail in the works of many researchers (Lefevere [1992], Delabastita [1997], Popa [2005], Chiaro [2010], Dore [2020], to name just a few), this topic can be safely called inexhaustible due to its breadth. In the area of English–Japanese translation studies in particular, the cultural and linguistic aspects of humor translation remain relatively unaddressed, compared to the contiguous area of Japanese–English studies (cf. Blyth [1957], Wells [1997], Ōshima [2001, 2006], Hibbett [2002], Davis [2006], and others). This work aims to partly fill in the lacuna by focusing on the Japanese

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¹ In this work, the American spelling of the word “humor” is adopted. However, where the word appears in citations, the British spelling (“humour”) is preserved.

translation of humor elements in Diana Wynne Jones's fantasy novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986).

The children's and young-adult novels of the British fantasist Diana Wynne Jones, abundant with magic, twisting plots, charming characters, and sparkling humor, have been actively translated into various foreign languages. *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986),² one of the best-known works that immediately became Jones's hallmark, was brought to Japanese readers by the translator Junko Nishimura (*Mahōtsukai Hauru to hi no akuma*, 1997). The novel received special attention, not least due to the fact that in 2004 Studio Ghibli, led by celebrated film director Hayao Miyazaki, released a world-famous anime adaptation (*Hauru no ugoku shiro*, 2004).

This paper examines the re-rendering strategies and methods applied by Nishimura to various humor elements in her Japanese translation of *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Mahōtsukai Hauru to hi no akuma*) and argues that the introduction of different comical devices in the translated text was to a large extent informed by three main factors: 1) Japanese culture-bound rhetorical conventions regarding certain types of humor (as will be further shown in the case studies, the presence or absence of the source text's humor in the Japanese translation frequently depends on the translator's interpretation and judgment about its appropriateness and recognizability in the target language culture); 2) linguistic dissimilarity, namely the (in)capacity of the target language (Japanese) to accommodate the source language's (English) comical devices without distorting their function (namely, to amuse the reader); and 3) specific characteristics of the author's humor. As this study will demonstrate, Jones's writing style is replete with a type of humor that Butler (2002) describes as "what might be called the carnivalesque at one end of the spectrum to the satirical or parodic" (Butler, 2002, p. 169), presenting certain difficulties for English–Japanese translation.

A brief overview of the first two determinants (culture-bound rhetorical conventions and linguistic dissimilarity) complicating the English–Japanese translation of humor opens the paper. The next section begins with a broad-brush outline of Diana Wynne Jones's distinctive humor features, then moves to the categorization of the comical devices employed in the fantasy novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), suggesting some potentially problematic translation issues. A correlation between the above three modalities and the translation strategies employed by Junko Nishimura in *Mahōtsukai Hauru to hi no akuma* is demonstrated in the case study of several excerpts wherein the novel's humor elements are translated into Japanese. The paper concludes with a reflection on the empirical work results, and suggests questions for further discussion.

² The first novel of the *Moving Castle* trilogy; the sequels are *Castle in the Air* (1990) and *House of Many Ways* (2008).

2. The Complexity of Humor Rendering in English–Japanese (EJ) Translation

Before proceeding with the analysis of the *Howl's Moving Castle* translation, it would be helpful first to illuminate the main possible causes that may hinder the process of humor³ translation from English into Japanese. In this study, culture-bound rhetorical conventions and linguistic dissimilarity are distinguished and used to describe the problem.

2.1. Culture-bound rhetorical conventions

Characterizing Japanese comic tradition, which dates back to ancient verses of *Man'yōshū*,⁴ Hibbett (2002) states that

[it] may be indefinably elusive, but humor in Japan, pungent or poetical, from the seeming stability of the long Tokugawa era down to the unsettling changes of the late twentieth century, has displayed extraordinary variety. [...] [H]omogeneity is not a characteristic of Japanese humor.

(Hibbett, 2002, p. 11)

Perhaps, the “elusive” aspect of the Japanese humor, and the fact that “it is not always obvious where exactly to look for permission for humor’s operations in Japan” (Davis, 2006, p. 1) have unwittingly fueled the false conviction⁵ among Anglophone cultures that “the humor of the Japanese is astonishingly mild and poetical, like weak, mint-flavoured tea” (Koestler, quoted in Hibbett, 2002, p. 11).

However, a more plausible reason for such stereotype is rooted in the cultural difference that presupposes a divergence in the way humor is expressed and used in Japanese and Anglophone cultures. As Blyth describes it, “though there may not be a distinctively Oriental or Occidental humour, the comic spirit is not unaffected by nationality” (Blyth, 1957, p. 1). While the *skopos* (purpose) of humor—to amuse the recipient—generally remains the same in any culture, the means that are used to create the effect may vary (Chiaro, 2010). In literary writings, the kind of humor employed generally depends on the author, who orchestrates the creation of the entire text and manipulates the reader’s reaction. Still, the choice of humor devices might be to some extent governed by the culture-bound rhetorical conventions on which forms of humor are considered more or less acceptable. For example, satire, a clearly defined genre in English literature, is “one of the forms of humor least seen in modern Japan” (Wells, cited in Davis, 2006, p. 193). That

³ In this work, the umbrella term “humor” is used for convenience, encompassing comical situations, jokes, wordplay, puns, irony, mockery, wit, etc., both in English and Japanese languages.

⁴ The oldest Japanese *waka* poetry collection, compiled in the second half of the eighth century (Katō, 1997).

⁵ This stereotype, however, has been repeatedly refuted in the works of both Japanese and Western scholars (see Hibbett (2002), Ōshima (2006), Takekuro (2006), Wells (1997) for details).

does not mean that the genre itself does not exist in Japanese literature (Natsume Sōseki's novels *I Am a Cat*, 1906, and *Botchan*, 1906, are salient examples of a whimsical satire), but rather that it is less accepted as a means of expressing comicality.

Following on from that, it is logical to assume that the transposition of humor from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) may be complicated if the type of humor (irony, oxymoron, parody, satire, pun, and so on) is uncommon in the target culture's literature. Culture-bound rhetorical conventions, in this case, refer to what can be called an unspoken agreement among target-culture recipients (readers) to recognize and perceive the translated text as humorous provided that it conforms with readers' ideas of what is considered funny and amusing in their own culture. In turn, for the translator, culture-bound rhetorical conventions of the TL readership become one of the determining factors in the questions of *how much* of the original humor can be represented in the translated version and *by which means* it can be done.

As will be further demonstrated in the example of Nishimura's translation of the comical devices in *Howl's Moving Castle*, what conventionally fits and is funny in the source text's (ST) context might not produce the same effect when rendered directly into the TL, or, even worse, could confuse the readers of the target text (TT), who would not be able to recognize and appreciate the comical device because of its uncommonness in their culture.

The Japanese culture-bound rhetorical conventions, therefore, act as a wide-meshed sieve through which the Anglophone humor of the ST must be sifted before actually being translated. The next filter would be the TL itself.

2.2. Linguistic dissimilarity

If culture-bound rhetorical conventions are rather subtle and difficult to pinpoint as an obvious hindrance for interlingual humor translation, linguistic dissimilarity (in other words, the difference between SL and TL on orthographic, phonological, morphological, syntactical, and other levels) is more apparent and straightforward.

A detailed discussion of the differences between the English and Japanese languages is not possible here due to the paper's limited scope (see the works of Refsing & Lundquist, 2009; Hasegawa, 2012; Donovan, 2020; Wakabayashi, 2021, and others). Suffice it to say that the philological remoteness of the English and Japanese languages complicates the process of humor translation: for example, wordplay of the English ST most likely will lose its comical effect (if retain any meaning at all) if rendered directly into the Japanese TT. In comparison, linguistically cognate languages of the same family group (Romance, Germanic, Slavic, etc.) are more accommodating for transferring wordplay or puns.

Thus, linguistic dissimilarity can be seen as another major cause of humor's "untranslatability" "in the sense that an *adequate degree of equivalence* is hard to achieve" (Chiaro, 2010, p. 8, original emphasis). Indeed, when translating any kind of text, a translator, *nolens volens*, aims for

some sort of similarity between the ST and TT, pursuing either the “equivalence of form” or “equivalence of effect” (also known as “dynamic” or “functional equivalence”, Nida, 1964).

In the case of interlingual translation of humor, the equivalent effect (to amuse, to entertain) to that of the original is desirable; therefore,

the formal equivalence, namely the similarity of lexis and syntax in source and target versions, is frequently sacrificed for the sake of dynamic equivalence. [...] [A]s long as the TT serves the same function, [...] it is of little importance if the TT has to depart somewhat in formal terms from the original.

(Chiaro, 2010, p. 8)

This statement is disputable, however, since in many literary works (including Diana Wynne Jones’s novels), the very form itself (the structure of the sentence, the word order, the use of punctuation) often becomes the tool of humor expression. It is reasonable to speculate that for rendering such types of humor, formal equivalence would be more suitable due to its emphasis on ST’s syntax and lexis. However, as Nishimura’s translation will show, it can rarely be achieved because of the aforementioned fundamental morpho-syntactic differences between the Japanese and English languages. This is not to say that “dynamic equivalence” is an easier option for a translator, especially if he/she aims to be faithful to the original text and use SL-oriented translation.

To sum up, the cultural and linguistic distance between the English and Japanese languages are two evident factors that impede the process of humor translation. However, it would be naïve to think that in literary translation, humor rendering is complex solely because of these differences: this work aims to demonstrate that the author’s writing style and skill in using language to convey the comical are equally important, and must be taken into account with the utmost consideration.

I will now move on to discussing the way humor functions in Diana Wynne Jones’s fantasy novel *Howl’s Moving Castle*.

3. Funny, but not simple: humor typology in Diana Wynne Jones’s *Howl’s Moving Castle*

3.1. Distinctive traits of Jones’s humor

Being asked in one interview about whether the humor in her books “comes unbidden” or is the result of her deliberate manipulations, Diana Wynne Jones answered the following:

No, you can’t think deliberately about it, not if you want it to come out through the story in a natural way. I do love ending up with very logical situations in which everything is totally absurd. [...] There’s no reason why one can’t make a serious point and be funny

too, actually, and I always like to have something humorous in my books—but it’s the book itself that dictates what kind of humour you’re going to have. Very early on, about three pages in if you’re lucky, it sets its own mode, and you really can’t transgress from that without spoiling the book. You can’t force it to be funny, but if it wants to be funny, I gallop along beside it saying “Come on, come on!” [...].

(Jones, quoted in Butler, 2002, p. 169)

For this study, it is particularly useful to receive such an explicit commentary on this aspect of writing from the author herself. Interpreting Jones’s words, it is possible to say that humor, naturally interwoven in the narration, aids its consolidation and enrichment, and is often perceived by readers as a constant “humorous, compassionate voice” (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 1). To what extent this effect can be reproduced in translation depends largely on how well the humorous elements have been transferred from SL to TL. The following comment from translator Junko Nishimura confirms that she also acknowledges the importance of humor in Jones’s writing:

The charm of Jones’s novels can be summed up in a few words: dizzyingly intricate and ingenious plotting, unique characters, a British sense of humor combined with playfulness, and the unusual use of magic.

(Nishimura, 1997, p. 308, author’s translation from the Japanese)

It is noteworthy that Nishimura describes Jones’s humor as British (*Igirisu-jin rashī*), thereby emphasizing its cultural aspect.⁶ But what exactly does that mean? What constitutes the “Britishness” of Jones’s humor, and how is it prominent in her writing? While the literary precursors from which Jones draws inspiration for her own novels have been sufficiently addressed and analyzed (Mendlesohn, 2005; Rosenberg, 2002; Eastwood, 2014; and others), no contemporary empirical evidence about the humor origins in Jones’s works has been reported, leaving space for interpretation. I believe that in addition to its innate sensibility, literary traditions and the influence of other classical English writers played an important role in shaping Jones’s unique “British humor.”

For example, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, highly praised by Jones in her critical essays “The Heroic Ideal—A Personal Odyssey” and “Inventing the Middle Ages” (Jones, 1989/2012), seems to have greatly influenced her way of expressing comicality. It can be traced, for example, in the way Jones uses gentle, slightly “patronizing” humor in describing her characters:

⁶ According to Laineste (2014), the prevalent elements of British humor are innuendo, satire, ridicule, intellectual humor, and puns. “It [British humor] ridicules mundane reality by satirically revealing the absurdity of everyday life [...]” (Laineste, 2014, p. 542).

In the land of Ingary, [...] it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes. Sophie Hatter was the eldest of three sisters. She was not even the child of a poor woodcutter, which might have given her some chance of success! [...] Sophie was the most studious. She read a great deal, and very soon realized how little chance she had of an interesting future.

(Jones, 1986, pp. 1–2)

Likewise, the frequent quotes, allusions, and reminiscences found in *Howl’s Moving Castle* suggest that the witty poetry of John Donne⁷ and the literary nonsense of Lewis Carroll⁸ were also important in shaping the very “British humor” mentioned by Nishimura. Furthermore, it is difficult to ignore the apparent heritage of the chapters’ titling diction in the *Moving Castle Series* (reminiscent of Swift, Dickens, and other classical writers).⁹ The Swiftian and Dickensian motifs in *Howl’s Moving Castle* can be traced by simple juxtaposition:

Table I: Comparison of the chapter titles of *Howl’s Moving Castle*, *The Pickwick Papers*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*

Literary text	Chapter title
Diana Wynne Jones, <i>Howl’s Moving Castle</i> (1986)	Chapter Three In Which Sophie Enters Into a Castle and a Bargain
Charles Dickens, <i>The Pickwick Papers</i> (1836)	Chapter XXXV. In which Mr. Pickwick thinks he had better go to Bath; and goes accordingly
Jonathan Swift, <i>Gulliver’s Travels</i> (1726)	Chapter 8 The Author, by a lucky accident, finds means to leave Blefuscu, and, after some difficulties, returns safe to his native country

⁷ Donne’s poem *Song* (1633) quoted in *Howl’s Moving Castle* has a dual nature in the novel: on the one hand it is a piece of poetry, studied at the school which Howl’s nephew attends; on the other hand, it is a powerful magic spell (precisely speaking, a curse) sent by the Witch of the Waste to punish Howl. This can also be seen as a good example of defamiliarization of the familiar, a trope often used by Jones.

⁸ Although the direct reference to the Mad Hatter from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) appears only once in Chapter Twelve, Carroll’s “nonsense” is a recurring leitmotif in *Howl’s Moving Castle* (often expressed through the absurdity of Howl’s utterances and actions).

⁹ It should be noted, however, that this way of titling chapters is not a unique British literary feature and can be found in many other contemporaneous texts, for example in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1615): “Chapter I Which treats of the character and pursuits of the famous gentleman Don Quixote of la Mancha” (de Cervantes Saavedra, 1885/1952, p. 17).

Of course, these findings are objectively insufficient to drive any concrete conclusions about what influenced the formation of Jones's humor, this aspect demanding separate in-depth research; however, it is possible to see the traces of other humorous literary texts and the subtle marks of English satirists that suffused the style of Jones's fantasy novels. It can be suggested that by describing Jones's humor as "British," Nishimura means the humor traditions that were intentionally or unintentionally absorbed by Jones and later surfaced on the pages of *Howl's Moving Castle*, giving it a particular "flavor."

The "Britishness" of the humor is undoubtedly difficult to convey in the Japanese translation, but in addition to that, the translator must take into account the intended readers of the TT: children and young adults (at least, this is the category Tokuma Shoten Publishing Ltd targeted when marketing Jones's books in Japan; Novoselova, 2021). The question then arises, how well can the target readers, presumably Japanese junior and senior high-school students, understand the quirky English humor of *Howl's Moving Castle*, spiced as it is with intertextuality? The first key to answering this question lies in understanding how Jones treats her (Anglophone) readers.

Commenting on Jones's style, White (2016) claims that

[b]ecause of her conscious efforts to write sentences that can easily be read to or by children, Jones's novels exhibit linguistic simplicity and directness, yet beneath the apparent simplicity are amazing depths [...].

(White, 2016, p. 125)

The clarity of Jones's writing appears on different levels, including humor. Noriko Ogiwara, a renowned Japanese fantasist, in her commentary on *Howl's Moving Castle* states that Jones is "a writer who makes no attempt to hide the humor and meanness that accompanies it" (Ogiwara, 2004, p. 410, author's translation from the Japanese). However, the overt humor of Jones's writing does not necessarily equate to simplicity, just as the clarity of the language does not undermine the depth of the content.

As will be partly affirmed by the further analysis of humor elements in *Howl's Moving Castle*, Jones refuses to resort to simplifications, detailed explanations, or excessive clarifications (conventionally expected from children's literature) to facilitate the reader's task. As she puts it:

I never worry about putting in things that are not within children's capacities, because I don't think this matters. I think it's very good for children to notice that there's something going on that they don't quite understand. This is a good feeling because it pulls you on to find out.

(Jones, quoted in Butler, 2002, p. 172)

The same approach—to constantly stimulate the reader—can also be seen in the way humor is used in Jones’s fantasy novels, challenging the belief that “for children [...] humour *must* be simple and spontaneous” (Fisher, 1976, p. 154, original emphasis). Therefore, for the translator, the task to render the comical in Jones’s novels is additionally complicated because the target readership might not be able to perceive the humor due to its unconventionality. The following section discusses in more detail the challenges of rendering Jones’s humor from English into Japanese and presents a typology of the comical elements in *Howl’s Moving Castle*.

3.2. The categorization of humor devices in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

The three fantasy novels about magical castles and houses that constitute the *Moving Castle Series* stand out among Jones’s other works; in particular, “these books present a much different tone than the others that use oral tradition, lighter and wittier, bordering on slapstick, that puts them in their own category” (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 5).

In order to better understand the challenges Nishimura faced when rendering Jones’s humor into Japanese, it would be helpful to first determine the nature of the humor. The first book of the trilogy, *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986) exhibits different kinds of comical elements that fall into four general categories introduced by Berger in his work *An Anatomy of Humor* (1993): language, logic, identity, and action. The following table shows the main humor techniques of *Howl’s Moving Castle* grouped according to Berger’s typology and exemplified.

Table II: Most common humor techniques used in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

I. Language	
<i>Allusion</i>	“We can’t all be Mad Hatters,” said Howl.
<i>Exaggeration</i>	Howl’s voice was presently heard shouting weakly, “Help me, someone! I’m dying from neglect up here!”
<i>Irony</i>	“Why have you made a jigsaw puzzle of my best suit? Just a friendly inquiry, you know.”
<i>Over literalness</i>	“Didn’t know I used to fly up the wing for my university, [...] Mrs. Nose?” “If you were trying to fly, you must have forgotten how,” Sophie said.
<i>Ridicule</i>	“Is that all you can do in the face of tragedy?” Howl asked. “Make toast!”
<i>Sarcasm</i>	“Why should I be annoyed? Someone only filled the castle with rotten aspic, and deafened everyone in Porthaven, and scared Calcifer to a cinder, and broke a few hundred hearts. Why should that annoy me?”
II. Logic	
<i>Absurdity</i>	“My shining dishonesty will be the salvation of me.”
<i>Mistakes</i>	“I’m delirious,” said Howl. “Spots are crawling before my eyes.” “Those are spiders,” said Sophie.

Repetition	“I’m not being nosy!” Sophie protested. [...] “Yes, you are nosy,” said Howl. “You’re a dreadfully nosy, horribly bossy, appallingly clean old woman.”
III. Identity	
Before/after	“Don’t worry, old thing,” Sophie said to the face. “You look quite healthy. Besides, this is much more like you really are.”
Eccentricity	Howl came dashing out of the bathroom looking his very finest, scenting the room with roses and yelling for Michael.
Imitation	By the time he [Howl] touched the floor, he was a curly red setter, just like the dog-man. [...] The two identical dogs walked round one another, glaring, growling, bristling, and getting ready to fight.
IV. Action	
Chase	There was a minute or so of helter-skelter chase, in which the dog ran hither and thither, whining in a disturbed way, and Mrs. Fairfax and Sophie ran after the dog, jumping flower beds and getting in one another’s way, and Michael ran after Sophie crying, “Stop! You’ll make yourself ill!”
Slapstick	“Howl says he’ll only look for Prince Justin if you promise him your daughter’s hand in marriage.” [...] The King gave her a concerned look. [...] After a second, Princess Valeria shunted herself out from under the desk in sitting position, grinning benignly. She had four teeth.
Speed	Zip! Back to the mansion. Zip! to Market Square. Zip! and there was the castle yet again. She was getting the hang of it. Zip! Here was Upper Folding—but how did you stop? Zip!

While this list cannot encompass all the shades of humor in *Howl’s Moving Castle*, it presents the most overt of them. To facilitate the further analysis of the Japanese translation of the novel given space constraints, I shall consolidate these four groups into the two broad classes of textual humor suggested by Ritchie (2010): referential and verbal.

Referential (or conceptual) humour uses language to convey some meaning (e.g. a story, a description of a situation or event) which is itself the source of humour, regardless of the medium used to convey it. Verbal humour, on the other hand, relies on the particular language used to express it, so that it may use idiosyncratic features of the language [...].”

(Ritchie, 2010, p. 34)

In other words, referential humor stems from the very content of the subject, verbal humor from the form of it. In this work *identity* and *action* humor techniques are attributed to the

referential-humor category, and the comical devices of *language* and *logic* groups to the verbal. The following excerpts from the novel are used to illustrate the issue. Examples I and II describe the funny episode wherein the main heroine, Sophie, experiences difficulties walking in a seven-league boot.

Example I: Referential humor in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

ST. Zip! Back to the mansion. Zip! to Market Square. Zip! and there was the castle yet again. She was getting the hang of it. Zip! Here was Upper Folding—but how did you stop? Zip! “Oh, confound it!” Sophie cried, almost in Marsh Folding again. This time she hopped round very carefully and trod with great deliberation. Zip! And fortunately the boot landed in a cowpat and she sat down with a thump.

The comicality of the situation—an old lady, frantically trying to stop the chaotic back and forth marching in a magical seven-league boot, finally finds salvation in landing in the cowpat (normally an unwanted outcome)—is clear and ingenious, and can be characterized as containing referential humor (Jones also uses *speed* as a comical tool to accelerate the narration and make the episode funnier). The next example shows how Jones describes the same situation using verbal humor expressed by the main male protagonist, Howl.

Example II: Verbal humor in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

ST: “I can also make you a pair of seven-league boots of your own if you give me your size. Something practical in brown calf, perhaps. It’s amazing the way one can take a step ten and a half miles long and still always land in a cowpat.”

The last sentence is overt ridicule, which belongs to verbal humor techniques. It is possible to argue, however, that the aforementioned examples contain elements of the contiguous category (Example I includes repetition, irony, onomatopoeia: “Zip!”). As will be shown, the humor types in *Howl’s Moving Castle* do not easily succumb to categorization, since there is no clear division between the groups. Ritchie explains that “[t]here appears to be no strict definition of the boundary between verbal and referential humour, with classification of examples being left to general intuition” (Ritchie, 2010, p. 35).

As shown in Example III below, Diana Wynne Jones successfully combines referential and verbal humor in her text.

Example III: Combination of referential and verbal humor in *Howl's Moving Castle*

ST. Meanwhile a certain amount of moaning and groaning was coming from upstairs. Sophie kept muttering to the dog and ignored it. A loud, hollow coughing followed, dying away into more moaning. Sophie ignored that too. Crashing sneezes followed the coughing, each one rattling the window and all the doors. Sophie found those harder to ignore, but she managed. Pootpooooot! went a blown nose, like a bassoon in a tunnel. The coughing started again, mingled with moans. Sneezes mixed with the moans and the coughs, and the sounds rose to a crescendo in which Howl seemed to be managing to cough, groan, blow his nose, sneeze, and wail gently all at the same time.

Not only does the situation itself contain humor, but the way in which it is described adds to its grotesque comicality: Jones actively uses repetition, exaggeration, simile, even absurdity. The humor of *Howl's Moving Castle* probably can be better characterized as a continuous sequence of so-called “jab lines”:

Jab lines are humorous elements which are fully integrated within the text in such a way that they do not disrupt the narrative flow. [...] In fact, we can safely say that the texture of humorous talk as well as humorous prose, more often than not consists of an interwoven tapestry of intermittent occurrences of jabs rather than a series of punches which are the offspring of actual jokes.

(Chiaro, 2010, pp. 14–15)

On the one hand, by freely combining referential and verbal humor and “jab lines” in *Howl's Moving Castle* (and in other novels as well), Jones creates her unique, recognizable humor that is so attractive to Anglophone readers. On the other hand, however, such an approach unintentionally complicates the translator's task: he/she has to not only preserve the overall “Britishness” of the humor but also find an appropriate comical equivalent (formal or dynamic) in the TL that the readers would comprehend.

The following section aims to demonstrate Nishimura's approach to rendering different types of humor in *Howl's Moving Castle* and presents a categorization of the applied translation strategies.

4. Case study: Japanese translation of humor elements in *Howl's Moving Castle*

In this practical section, Nishimura's translation approaches (pursuing either formal or dynamic equivalence) as applied to the ST's comical devices (verbal or referential) are interpreted from the point of view of their dependence on such factors as culture-bound rhetorical conventions, language dissimilarity, and authorial style. For the sake of convenience, the analysis is divided

into three sections: the examination of EJ (1) verbal humor rendering and (2) referential humor rendering, and (3) the study of specific issues in humor translation that do not fit into the two first groups and hence expose the limitations of the presented categorization system.¹⁰

As has been noted before, the isolation of comical elements in *Howl’s Moving Castle* is complicated since Jones often combines verbal and referential humor techniques in her novels; thus, in some cases presented here, the categories may overlap.

4.1. Japanese translation of the verbal humor in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

It is impossible here to cover all the diverse cases of verbal humor rendering in the Japanese edition of *Howl’s Moving Castle* (hereafter *HMC*); therefore, I selected examples that clearly demonstrate Nishimura’s approach to translating the ST’s verbal humor into Japanese. The examples include exaggeration, irony, wordplay, allusion, and absurdity.

Example IV: Rendering of *exaggeration* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. Chapter 5 Which is Far Too Full of Washing

TT. 五章 掃除、掃除、掃除

Here the ST humor lies in both exaggeration and the narrator’s intrusion into the diegetic space of the novel (bending the convention that the title should be neutral and descriptive, devoid of the “author’s voice”). While the TT does not recreate the latter aspect, it uses the verbatim repetition of the word 掃除 (“cleaning”) to convey the ST title’s exaggeration (“Far Too Full”) and incongruity (a mundane task of washing emphasized as an important element of the chapter’s plot). It is clear that formal equivalence in this case would run counter to both culture-bound rhetorical conventions and linguistic standards, since the Japanese literary texts do not use this type of chapter titling (掃除がいっぱいの第5章 would be the minimally adequate translation option); therefore, Nishimura resorted to a dynamic equivalence—exaggeration created by repetition—to render the humor. As a result, the TT’s version, while not highly faithful to the ST, preserves its function to amuse the reader.

Another type of “British” humor device that Jones favors in her novels and that presents a difficulty for the EJ translation is irony. As Chiaro (2010) explains, “[i]t can sometimes be extremely hard to understand whether someone is being ironic when they do not designate the irony via evident prosodic or stylistic features” (Chiaro, 2010, p. 15); this is fair for Jones’s writing, which equilibrates between a gentle nudging of her characters and a frank description of their foibles, as shown in the following example:

¹⁰ Given the limited scope of this paper, I have selected only the most salient and interesting cases to illustrate the three categories, unavoidably weeding out many other worthy examples.

Example V: Rendering of *irony* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. That night, as she sewed, Sophie admitted to herself that her life was rather dull. Instead of talking to the hats, she tried each one on as she finished it and looked in the mirror. This was a mistake.

TT. その晩、帽子を作りながらソフィーは、毎日がつまらない、とはっきり思いました。そこで帽子に話しかけるかわりに、仕上げた帽子をかぶっては鏡をのぞいてみることにしました。でも、これはうまくいきませんでした。

The ironic, pithy comment (another author's intrusion) at the end almost amounts to ツッコミ (*tsukkomi*, a sharp, witty remark),¹¹ but Nishimura does not attempt to render it in her translation, using a much milder expression "it didn't go well." We can surmise two explanations for such translation. Firstly, if translated literally (ex. これは間違いだった/これは失敗でした) this phrase might sound slightly ambiguous and cause a misunderstanding among readers: Was Sophie wearing the hat the wrong way, was there something unusual with the mirror, etc.? Even though the explanation follows right after, a split-second confusion would still disturb the reading and is therefore avoided with the help of a more straightforward phrasing. Secondly, the mitigation of irony may be attributed to the culture-bound rhetorical conventions: perhaps the translator fears that children, not accustomed to such humor device, will not be able to understand the irony or will perceive the phrase too literally and, accordingly, will not find it amusing.

The translation is further simplified by the added conjunction でも ("but") that logically connects the sentences, making the TT more coherent, even though such "unforeseeable" jab lines are common in Jones's writing and constitute her style. Nishimura achieves a certain level of the dynamic equivalence (both ST and TT play on frustrated expectations), even though the humorous element in the Japanese translation is diluted.

I shall move to another comical element that while not being as frequently used in the *Moving Castle Series* as the other verbal humor devices nonetheless presents an interesting case for the analysis: wordplay.

Example VI: Rendering of *wordplay* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. "Go to bed, you fool," Calcifer said sleepily. "You're drunk."

"Who, me?" said Howl. "I assure you, my friends, I am cone sold stober."

TT. 「早く寝ろよ、まぬけ」カルシファーが眠そうに言いました。「あんた、酔っぱらってら」

「誰、ぼくのこと？言っとくけどね、ぼくはしーらふそのもんさ」

¹¹ The term originates from the Japanese stand-up comedy show known as *manzai* (漫才 comic dialogue), where two comedians take the roles of *boke* (ボケ fool) and *tsukkomi* (つつこみ wit or straight man) and "amuse an audience with their quick-fire banter" (Inoue, 2006, p. 29).

Obviously, what Howl meant to say was “stone-cold sober,” but being very drunk, he mixed up the beginnings of the words (stone-cold sober), producing a funny yet intelligible gibberish (in linguistic terms, *metathesis*, the transposition of sounds). For the translator, the challenge, in this case, was to come up with equivalent Japanese wordplay based on transposition that would still be recognizable to the readers. The linguistic dissimilarity between English and Japanese discussed earlier manifests itself clearly in this example: if swapping words’ first letters in the English ST creates a humorous effect, the same approach applied in the TT may not have a directly equivalent result.¹²

Nishimura’s solution is to write the key-word しらふ (“sober”) in *hiragana*, elongating the sound し with a dash, which makes the word sound incorrect but still recognizable. Even though the translated doppelganger differs from the original wordplay, the amusing element is nevertheless preserved in the TT and reinforced by the informal expression そのもんさ (approx. “that’s right”). As we can see from this example, Nishimura, while constrained in her translation options by the dissimilarity of the two languages, draws on the linguistic tools that the Japanese language suggests to tackle the “untranslatable” humor element.

The last humor techniques discussed in this section are allusion and absurdity, combined in one excerpt.

Example VII: Rendering of *allusion* + *absurdity* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

<p>ST. He picked the skull out of the sink and held it in one hand, mournfully. “<u>Alas, poor Yorick!</u>” he said. “<u>She heard mermaids</u>, so it follows <u>there is something rotten in the state of Denmark</u>. <u>I have caught an everlasting cold, but luckily I am terribly dishonest. I cling to that.</u>”</p> <p>TT. 流しにどけられていた頭蓋骨をつかみ、片手にのせて、憂鬱そうにこう言ったからです。「<u>あわれ、ヨーリックよ！</u>（*）ソフィーは人魚の声を聞いた。となると、<u>デンマークでは何かが腐っていることになる</u>。ぼくはとわに続く風邪につかまった。<u>幸いにして、ぼくって不正直きわまりないやつだろ、だからあの呪いの『正直者の風』という一行だけは実現しそうにない。それだけが頼みの綱だな</u>」</p>
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In this scene, Howl quotes famous lines from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (single underline). The first thing that catches the eye when we look at the Japanese translation is the presence of a footnote (*) that explains the allusion: “[i]t is a reference to the scene in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* wherein Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, talks to the skull of a man named Yorick”

¹² That does not imply that the Japanese language is deprived of such humoristic device as wordplay; on the contrary, punning or *sha-re* (しゃれ; 洒落) is “the most frequently used technique to provoke laughter in Japan” (Nagashima, 2006, p. 75).

(Nishimura, 2013, p. 303, author's translation from the Japanese).¹³ As has been mentioned earlier, Jones supplies her texts with allusions without fear that the Anglophone reader will not be able to decode them: “[t]he reading child, Jones seems to be saying, has an unconscious awareness of intertextuality” (Mendlesohn, 2005, p. 194). However, for a Japanese target reader, literary allusions to classical English texts may remain obscure, possibly due to the lack of background knowledge of Anglophone literature (one can only appreciate humor if one is capable of understanding it); thus, in order to retain even a fraction of the allusion's comical effect, an ancillary piece of information is desirable. It is not clear whether it was due to the translator's initiative or editorial policy, but throughout the Japanese edition of *Howl's Moving Castle* all allusions and intertextualities are accompanied by footnotes: a translation crutch, indispensable rather than optional.

The second element that presents difficulty for EJ translation in this excerpt is absurdity (double underline). Absurdity, according to Berger (1993), “doesn't necessarily take the form of silliness [...] but may be an example of a relatively sophisticated philosophical position” (Berger, 1993, p. 19); it is the “sophisticated” aspect that Jones makes use of in her novels. What on the surface seems just an illogical string of words in the ST is actually a very concise summary of the latest events to have occurred in the novel: Howl got cursed by the Witch of the Waste (the curse is John Donne's *Song* wherein mermaids, wind (cold), and an honest mind are mentioned); however, until he, a very dishonest and “slithering-out” wizard, actually becomes an honest person, the curse will not be fulfilled. That is why he says that he will “cling to that.” In other words, the alleged absurdity of this excerpt draws its comicality from its tightly compressed narrative re-enactment.

Jones, in her usual manner, leaves hints and bits of important information in each chapter, so that in the end, an attentive reader gathering all those pieces of the jigsaw can construct the whole picture. It is possible to say that in Jones's works, “the space between beginning and end in narrative is where the reader will be involved in doing work” (Cobley, 2014, p. 11). However, as we see from the Japanese translation, Nishimura, while recognizing absurdity as an important element of Jones' writing style, nonetheless succumbs to the temptation of simplifying the reader's task by adding a short explanation: “[t]hat's why that one line of the curse, “Wind of Honesty,” is unlikely to come true” (author's translation from the Japanese). Nishimura, thus, takes on part of the reader's work and deciphers the key element of the passage, leaving little chance that this excerpt would have the equivalent humor effect in the TT.

¹³ It is interesting that Nishimura explains only one part of the allusion. Indeed, the line “Alas, poor Yorick!” belongs to Prince Hamlet (*Hamlet*, Act 8 Scene 10); however, the famous “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” appears much earlier in the play and is uttered by Marcellus (*Hamlet*, Act 1 Scene 4). Either the translator thought that this is insignificant or, perhaps, she did not want to overload the note with too many details.

One can argue that when a complex literary text with “subtle humor” like in *Howl’s Moving Castle* is translated into Japanese, decoding of the absurdity is unavoidable if one is to avoid its removal. But, on the other hand, such translatorial interference runs counter to Jones’s idea that children should develop “critical reading” skills (and, by the same token, cultivate a sensitivity to implicit humor).

Having presented examples of verbal humor rendering in the Japanese translation of *Howl’s Moving Castle* I will now move to the next category: referential humor.

4.2. Japanese translation of the referential humor in *Howl’s Moving Castle*

To demonstrate Nishimura’s translation approaches for rendering referential humor in *HMC* I have selected examples that use speed and before/after (transformation) as humor devices (the choice was informed by the minimal admixture of verbal humor in these passages).

Example VIII: Rendering of *speed* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

<p>ST. Zip! Back to the mansion. Zip! to Market Square. Zip! and there was the castle yet again. She was getting the hang of it. Zip! Here was Upper Folding—but how did you stop? Zip!</p> <p>TT. ぴゅっで、さっきの大邸宅。ぴゅっで、〈がやがや広場〉。ぴゅっで、またもや城です。じよじよにこつがわかってきました。ぴゅっ。〈上折れ谷〉です—でも、どうすれば止まれるのでしょ う? ぴゅっ。</p>

This scene has been discussed earlier, but I would like to highlight the apparent formal equivalence between the ST and TT. The comicality of this passage is based on its speed, with short sentences and the onomatopoeic “Zip!” visually representing the rapid change of scenes, the fast movement of the character in space. To better render this humor element, the translator has to follow the original wording, and we can see from the following two elements that Nishimura’s translation indeed departs little from the original form: preserved noun-ended sentences (which are not very typical for the Japanese language, meaning that Nishimura purposely backtracks from the TL conventions); and similar use of punctuation (long dash, question mark). Although exclamation marks (less often used in Japanese than English) are replaced with commas and periods, this does not significantly disturb the form and the rhythm of the passage. The analysis thus suggests that Nishimura makes use of formal equivalence for rendering the referential humor of the novel. The following is another example of Nishimura’s favoring of formal equivalency in rendering referential humor.

Example IX: Rendering of *before/after* in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. Sophie and Michael ran to the broom cupboard, where they seized a velvet cloak each and flung them on. Sophie got the one that turned its wearer into a red-bearded man. Now she knew why Calcifer had laughed at her in the other one. Michael was a horse.

TT. ソフィーとマイケルは物置に走り、ビロードのマントをそれぞれはおりました。ソフィーのマントは赤ひげの男に変わるほうでした。ソフィーは前にもう一枚のマントをはおったとき、カルシファーに笑われたわけがようやくわかりました。そのマントを着たマイケルが、馬になったからです。

The “before and after” humor technique (also known as “metamorphosis” and “transformation”) can “generate humor two ways—by ridiculing others who do not change and may be very rigid or by ridiculing the person who changes” (Berger, 1993, pp. 23–24). This excerpt, thus, exemplifies the second type of humor source.

As in the previous example, Nishimura does not significantly move away from the ST’s structure, creating as she does a formally equivalent translation. However, the final part of the ST, which contains the core of the referential humor (based on an incongruity), is more explicit in the Japanese translation: compare ST. “Michael was a horse” and TT. “Because Michael, wearing that cloak, became a horse” (author’s translation from the Japanese). Again, to make the humor of this scene more accessible and less ambiguous, Nishimura supplies her translation with explanatory details such as *そのマントを着た*, *になった*, and *から* (an approach we saw in Examples V and VII).

Based on this very limited snapshot analysis, we may nevertheless infer that in cases where following the ST’s form does not openly conflict with TL norms, Nishimura’s approach to rendering the novel’s referential humor is overall biased toward formal equivalency, albeit deliberately purging possible ambiguity and interspersing concise clarifications where needed.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss several cases which cannot be definitively attributed to the two categories described above.

4.3. Specific humor-rendering issues in the Japanese translation of *Howl’s Moving Castle*

The value of the following examples is that they demonstrate (1) how any categorization of humor, including the one presented in this work, is conditional and labile, and (2) that in some cases, it is effectively impossible to point to the exact reason why the translator chose one or another translation method.

Example X: Mistranslation of humor in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. [H]e held the shiny gray paper out in front of Neil. Both boys looked at it. Neil said, “It’s a poem,” in the way most people would say, “It’s a dead rat.” “It’s the one Miss Angorian set for last week’s homework,” said the other boy. “I remember ‘wind’ and ‘finned.’ It’s about submarines.”

TT. ハウルはニールの顔の前につやのある灰色の紙をかざしました。少年たちはそれを眺めました。ニールが「詩だ」と答えましたが、その口調は誰かが「死んだネズミだ」と言うときと同じ、うんざりした調子でした。「アンゴリアン先生が先週の宿題に出したやつだね」もう一人の少年が言います。「『風を見つける』とかいうとこを覚えてるよ、帆船のことだろ」

Why would Nishimura translate the word “submarines” as 帆船 (a sailing ship)? It is apparent that Jones uses a mistake as a humor technique in this scene: a young boy confuses the sailing boat, which uses the wind in sails to move, with a submarine that floats under the water. Could it be that Nishimura considered this joke too obscure and decided to avoid it altogether? Or perhaps she thought that there is a logical mistake in the ST and “corrected” it? As Chiaro (2010) characterizes, “[w]hen an example of VEH [verbally expressed humor] is ignored in translation, we can never be quite sure whether the omission is due to a deliberate translational strategy or to the lack of recognition of the original wordplay” (Chiaro, 2010, p. 12).

Example XI: Substitution of humor in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. He got up and stalked upstairs, feeling for the wall as if he thought it might escape him unless he kept in touch with it. His bedroom door did escape him. “What a lie that was!” Howl remarked as he walked into the wall.

TT. ハウルは立ちあがると、勢いよく二階へ進みましたが、壁に触っているところを見ると、そうでもしないと壁に逃げられると思いきこんでいるようです。もともと寝室の扉には逃げられたようでした。「今日が呪いが完結する日だなんて、嘘っぱち」壁にぶちあたったハウルは言いました。

This excerpt serves as a fine example of Jones freely combining different humor techniques within one scene: slapstick (Howl bumps into the door), absurdity (the door “escapes” him), and irony (dramatic exclamation). While the first two comical elements are delivered unchanged in the Japanese TT, the last part is drastically different from the original and translated as: “[u]nbelievable that today is the day when the curse will be completed” (author’s back translation from the Japanese). Perhaps, the reason for such rendering lies in misinterpretation.

In this scene, drunk Howl walks into the wall, thinking that the door “deceived” him and “escaped”; therefore, he says, “What a lie that was!” (about the door). I tend to interpret it this

way also because the word “remarked” is used. I suspect that either Nishimura misinterpreted this phrase, or she decided that direct translation would not work in the Japanese TT (as we have seen, she tries to eliminate possible ambiguity in her translation), and thus used substitution to make the text more coherent (and to connect it to the following sentences, where Howl actually talks about the curse).

Example XII: Humor amplification in the Japanese translation of *HMC*

ST. “What are you doing?” cried Michael and Calcifer in a horrified chorus.

“Cleaning up,” Sophie replied firmly.

TT. 「何する気？」マイケルとカルシファーがおびえて叫びます。

「そ、う、じ」ソフィーはきっぱり答えました。

In rare cases, Nishimura deliberately manipulates the translation to make it sound funnier than the original text, as shown in the example above. The contrast between Michael and Calcifer’s reaction and Sophie’s words constitutes the comicality of the situation. However, in the TT, it is stressed even more by the way Nishimura splits the word 掃除 (“cleaning”) into morae and separates each with a comma, slowing down the reading and amplifying the comical effect. It can probably be considered as a compensatory technique: since in many cases Nishimura has to dilute the humor to fit the translation into the TL conventions, she tries to balance it by adding humor in some other places, maintaining the overall humorous tone of the original novel.

5. Findings’ significance

To sum up, the presented examples illustrate the challenges Nishimura had to face when rendering *Howl’s Moving Castle* humor elements from English into Japanese. The analysis of the translation of different humor techniques suggests that Nishimura’s translation choices were predominantly influenced both by the comical devices’ stylistic value in the original text and equally the imperative of adherence to TL cultural and linguistic conventions.

The analysis indicated that Nishimura’s overall strategy is to use dynamic (functional) equivalence when rendering verbal humor (since linguistic dissimilarity hinders the verbatim transmission of the language-based humor), and formal equivalence when dealing with referential (conceptual) humor (where the language’s main contribution is to convey some information, meaning, description of a situation, etc.); this pattern can be traced throughout the TT. However, when the culture-bound rhetorical conventions of the TL do not permit the direct rendering of the humor, the translator sometimes resorts to explications (as can be seen in Examples V, VII, IX, and XI).

The results of this study suggest that even though some comical elements of *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986) were filtered out in the process of EJ translation, *Mahōtsukai Hauru to hi no akuma*

(1997) nonetheless preserves the novel’s *jeu d’esprit* and gives Japanese readers an insight into what “British” humor is. A rather balanced approach taken by Nishimura allows her to entertain the target Japanese readers (children and young adults) without overloading them with unfamiliar usage of comical devices.

Thus, Nishimura’s rendering of Jones’s verbal wit and physical comedy has shown in microcosm how the “alien” Anglophone humor can be possibly accommodated in Japanese literary translation to be enjoyed by readers of a different cultural background.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated the challenges the translator Junko Nishimura faced when rendering the humor of Diana Jones’s fantasy novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986) from English into Japanese. In particular, Japanese culture-bound rhetorical conventions, the linguistic dissimilarity between English and Japanese, and specific features of Jones’s humor were distinguished as the main governing factors that informed Nishiura’s decisions on how to introduce the humor of the original novel into her translation.

The theoretical section demonstrated that apart from different perceptions of humor in Anglophone and Japanese cultures, and the linguistic limitations that preclude the importation of some comical devices into the TL, Diana Wynne Jones’s writing style itself constitutes a problem for interlingual translation: notwithstanding her being a children’s and young-adult writer, her works exhibit great narrative depth, complex intertextuality, and at times subtle humor. By adopting the typology of humor techniques in narratives suggested by Berger (1993) and Ritchie’s classification of humor (2010), I attempted to categorize the frequent comical elements of Jones’s novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* and then show how the author combines them in her writing, creating a particular type of humor which Nishimura described as “British.”

The translation analysis section examined the translator’s approaches to rendering the verbal and referential humor of the original text; the examples used in this study were selected to show the diversity and complexity of the humor translation issues. An overall tendency can be noted in Nishimura’s use of dynamic equivalence when translating the ST’s verbal humor and formal equivalence for transmitting referential comical devices. I believe these findings justify the choice of the subject material and can be further extrapolated to other investigations of humor rendering in English–Japanese literary translation.

To sum up, this brief treatment of the problem of EJ humor translation leaves a vast field open for further research on both Diana Wynne Jones’s writings and interlingual rendering of humor. One potential avenue that I would like to suggest includes the analysis of other novels from the *Moving Castle* series and the discussion of humor translation by Izumi Ichida (who worked on the last book of the trilogy) and its comparison with Nishimura’s approaches.

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