



An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Matsuo Basho's 'The Old Pond' Haiku: Exploring Stylistic Nuances and Linguistic Sensibilities in English Translation

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate the stylistic devices employed in the various English translations of Matsuo Basho's renowned haiku "The Old Pond" and how these nuances affect the content of the haiku in relation to its original version. Haiku has transformed from a form of entertainment to an art form recognized for its simplicity and aesthetic creativity. The research uses content analysis to scrutinize various components of the haiku and to conduct an analysis of specific stylistic techniques, forms, themes, and common motifs. The haiku has been translated into various languages, and this research questions how to achieve a faithful translation of Basho's aesthetic sensibility and linguistic nuances. The analysis is conducted with an interdisciplinary approach to understanding Basho's artistic vision in its linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. The research concludes with a theoretical analysis of how language alone can fully render Basho's haiku, given its imagined and tangible nature. The analysis of the original haiku in Japanese and its stylistic nuances is also presented in the research

Keywords: haiku, stylistic devices, translations, Matsuo Basho, content analysis, stylistic techniques, forms, linguistic nuances

INTRODUCTION

Haiku, a form of Japanese poetry, has earned universal recognition as one of the most renowned and widely-used Japanese literary forms. Initially, haiku was known as hokku and served as the opening stanza of a larger work of literature. Over time, it evolved into poetry that could stand on its own and became recognized as a concise and straightforward form of Japanese poetry (Higginson, 2013). Haiku has transformed from a form of entertainment to an art form recognized for its simplicity and aesthetic creativity. A haiku consists of just 17 syllables arranged in three lines, each with a specified number of syllables (5-7-5). Though the form began as a form of entertainment, haiku has undergone a transformative evolution, reaching the zenith of artistic expression and aesthetic creativity.

Among the most prominent names associated with haiku is that of Matsuo Basho, whose legacy remains deeply enshrined in the annals of Japanese literature. Matsuo Basho is widely regarded as the most famous poet of the Edo period in Japan (Norwich, 1993). He was born in 1644 in Ueno, in what is now the Iga Province of Mie Prefecture, Japan. He is best known for his haiku poetry and is considered the father of the haiku (Ross, 2002). He was a master of the 17-syllable form and composed numerous poems that captured the beauty of nature and the world around him. Basho's work is highly regarded for its depth and simplicity. He often used simple language to evoke powerful emotions and images, a style that has influenced countless poets since his time. Many of his poems reflect the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment and appreciating the beauty of the natural world.

Furthermore, Basho's influence on Japanese literature and culture is immeasurable. His poems and prose have been studied and admired for centuries, and his legacy continues to inspire poets and writers around the world. Basho's work has been translated into numerous languages, transcending both temporal and spatial boundaries. His haiku in particular has been a source of inspiration for poets and writers in many cultures (Shirane, 1998). Basho's haiku, "Furuike" otherwise known as "Old Pond" vividly portrays the tranquil beauty of nature. This haiku in particular has gained recognition all around the world for its depiction of nature, its economy of language, and its depth of meaning.

Despite its universal appeal, the question remains: how does one achieve a faithful translation of Basho's delicate aesthetic sensibility and the linguistic nuances that he so masterfully employs? This inquiry necessitates an interdisciplinary approach and begs a theoretical analysis of the linguistic, cultural, and social contexts that informed Basho's artistic vision.

Thus, this research aims to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the stylistic devices applied in the various translations of Matsuo Basho's haiku "The Old Pond," and;
2. How do these nuances in translation affect the content of the haiku in reference to the original version?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

At the outset, the researcher undertook an exhaustive and thorough study of the haiku's original language, Japanese, followed by a critical reading of several theses, journals, and articles containing various English translations. The process of content analysis was employed to scrutinize the various components of the text. It was also utilized to conduct a meaningful analysis of specific stylistic techniques, forms, themes, and common motifs present in the haiku. Based on the examination of the gathered information, conclusions and recommendations were subsequently drawn. In sum, the analysis was carried out in a meticulous and methodical manner to provide a comprehensive understanding of the haiku and its various translations.

DISCUSSION

Original Version (Japanese/Romanized)

古池や	furu ike ya
蛙飛びこむ	kawazu tobikomu
水の音	mizu no oto

In terms of form, Aitken (2003) argued that 'Ya' is a cutting word that separates and yet joins the expressions before and after. It is punctuation that marks a transition i.e., a particle of anticipation. He further argues that though there is a pause in meaning at the end of the first segment, the next two segments have no pause between them. In the original, the words of the second and third parts build steadily to the final word 'oto.' This has penetrating impact such as 'the frog jumps in water's sound.' Haiku poets commonly play with their base of three parts, running the meaning past the end of one segment into the next, playing with their form, as all artists do variations on the form they are working with. The name 'haiku' means 'plays verse.'

At the denotative level, Basho's haiku simply says that there is an old pond, that a frog jumps into it, and that the sound of water is heard. Semantically speaking, as is typical of haiku, his poem is made up of two parts using the cutting word, 'ya' 'the old pond' and 'a frog jumps in / the sound of the water.' The tension is thus created by the collocation of these two parts: the sharp contrast between the static image of an old pond, evocative of stillness and loneliness, and the lively image of an energetic animal that jumps into the pond and makes the water sound (Crowley, 2007) This conflict gives readers something to think about, providing them with both meaning and a visual image.

On the other hand, at the connotative level, Basho added an extra layer of meaning or surprise by using a kigo, kawazu (frog), in an unusual way. With its circle of associations, kawazu provided a special pipeline to the reader, increasing the complexity and capacity of the poem (Shirane, 1997).

Another approach to analyzing this haiku is to examine its interplay of the natural and the spiritual elements. The haiku's simplicity and economy of language in describing the natural scene of a frog jumping into an old pond and creating a sound of water can be seen as a manifestation of Basho's Zen-inspired aesthetics that seek to capture the essence of nature and evoke a sense of enlightenment or awakening. The frog can be interpreted as a symbol of the transience and impermanence of life, while the old pond represents the timeless and eternal cycle of nature. The sound of water can be seen as a metaphor for the sound of enlightenment or the awakening of consciousness. Therefore, the haiku can be read as a spiritual meditation on the interconnectedness of all things and the fleeting nature of human existence in the grand scheme of the universe.

Furthermore, this analysis of Matsuo Basho's "The Old Pond" haiku delves into the interplay between Chinese and Japanese elements in linked verse compositions, a topic explored in Xie's (2017) dissertation. The juxtaposition and integration of these two entities are showcased in the use of kanbun, classical Chinese, and vernacular Japanese poetry, which form a distinctive world from the Japanese verses that typically adhere to Japanese poetic traditions. While the Chinese verses may draw upon Chinese poetry, they also deviate from it and incorporate Japanese elements. This demonstrates the hybridity and instability of "Chineseness" in Japanese literature and reveals that the Sino-Japanese relationship in literary texts is not unidirectional. The incorporation of Chinese literature and thought into popular linked verse by Basho's circle, as well as the mediation of Chinese texts by Yamaguchi Sodo, showcases the complex interplay and integration of Chinese and Japanese elements in linked verse. Ultimately, Basho's haiku can be seen as a microcosm of the interplay between Chinese and Japanese elements that are present in linked verse compositions.

Various English Translations

Below are the different English translations and interpretations of the haiku from various international and Japanese writers:

a. Lafcadio Hearn (1898):

[Old pond—frogs jumped in—sound of water.]

Hearn's (1898) English translation of Matsuo Basho's haiku "The Old Pond" attempts to capture the simplicity and elegance of the original Japanese text. However, it is not without its drawbacks. While Hearn's translation remains faithful to the original haiku's structure, its word choice, and punctuation, it does not fully capture the nuances and spiritual dimensions of the original. For instance, Hearn's use of "sound of water" to describe the splash of the frog jumping into the pond seems to lack the profundity and symbolic significance of the original haiku. This is especially important in light of the interpretation of the frog and the pond as symbols of impermanence and the eternal cycle of nature.

Additionally, Hearn's translation does not fully capture the musicality of the original haiku. The original haiku has a distinctive rhythm and flow, which reflects the sound of the water and the frog's jump. This rhythmic quality is less pronounced in Hearn's translation, which is more focused on the literal meaning of the words.

Furthermore, Hearn's use of the dash punctuation in place of the traditional kireji (cutting word) found in Japanese haiku results in a lack of clarity and tension that is present in the original haiku. The dash also seems to separate the elements of the haiku instead of binding them together, which is a crucial element in Japanese haiku.

Despite these shortcomings, Hearn's translation remains an important contribution to the reception and interpretation of Basho's haiku in English-speaking countries. It offers readers a glimpse into the beauty and simplicity of Basho's poetry and serves as a gateway to a deeper understanding of the original haiku.

b. Curtis Hidden Page (1923):

[A lonely pond in age-old stillness sleeps... Apart, unstirred by sound or motion... till suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps.]

Page's (1923) translation of Matsuo Basho's "The Old Pond" haiku offers a more descriptive and elaborate version compared to other translations. The three lines provide an intricate depiction of the pond, with an emphasis on its stillness and age. The adjectives used to describe the pond, such as "lonely" and "age-old," emphasize the sense of isolation and timelessness, creating a melancholic atmosphere. Furthermore, Page's translation portrays a sense of suspense by using the word "till," which suggests an imminent event. The phrase "suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps" creates a vivid image of the frog jumping into the pond and disrupting its stillness.

However, the length and complexity of Page's version stray away from the simplicity and economy of language that is typically associated with haiku poetry. While it may be seen as a beautifully written poem on its own, it arguably loses the essence and focus of the original haiku. The description of the pond and the use of phrases like "unstirred by sound or motion" detract from the emphasis on the sound of water and the frog's leap, which are the main elements of Basho's haiku. In addition, Page's translation does not conform to the syllabic structure of haiku, which could be considered a fundamental aspect of the form. Overall, while Page's interpretation of "The Old Pond" haiku offers a different perspective and imagery, it could be argued that it deviates too far from the original haiku's focus and style.

c. Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1956):

[Into the ancient pond A frog jumps Water's sound!]

Suzuki's (1956) English translation and interpretation of Matsuo Basho's haiku, "The Old Pond," is a simple yet powerful rendering of the original Japanese text. Suzuki's translation accurately captures the essence of the haiku by preserving the natural setting of the old pond and the sudden appearance of the frog that causes ripples and the sound of water. The use of the exclamation point at the end of the haiku further emphasizes the sudden and unexpected nature of the frog's appearance, which surprises the reader with the sound of water.

Suzuki's translation successfully maintains the brevity and simplicity of the original haiku by using only a few words to evoke a vivid image of the natural world. The use of the word "ancient" to describe the pond adds an element of timelessness and permanence, further emphasizing the transience of life and the enduring nature of nature. Additionally, the translation emphasizes the relationship between the frog and the water's sound, as the frog's sudden appearance produces the sound.

Overall, Suzuki's translation of "The Old Pond" demonstrates a deep understanding of the nuances of the haiku form and the importance of preserving the original poem's natural setting and interplay between the natural elements.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Matsuo Basho's "The Old Pond" haiku is a classic example of the Zen-inspired aesthetics of haiku that seek to capture the essence of nature and evoke a sense of enlightenment or awakening. The poem juxtaposes the static image of an old pond with the lively image of a frog that jumps into it, creating a sound of water. This interplay of natural and spiritual elements creates tension and provides readers with both meaning and a visual image. The haiku's form, interplay of Chinese and Japanese elements, and the choice of kigo, or season word, add depth and complexity to the poem. Despite the different English translations, Matsuo Basho's "The Old Pond" haiku remains a timeless work that captures the essence of haiku poetry.

In reference to stylistics, it was revealed that the haiku employs a variety of stylistic devices such as certain punctuations, plural forms of nouns, allusion, and imageries that elicited deep interpretations to the text. In addition, all the translations of Basho's selected haiku and the translations done by various translators significantly differ from one another linguistically and semantically. The core idea is the same in all languages, but the diction and explanation are nuanced.

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