



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

JAPANSKA

# Lost in localisation

*A translation analysis of Final Fantasy VII*

**Theo Gillberg**

Kandidatuppsats

HT 2013

Handledare:

Martin Nordeborg

Examinator:

Pia Moberg

## **Abstract**

This paper details issues involved in localising video games through analysis of the Japanese and English scripts of a popular role-playing game, *Final Fantasy VII*. The goal of localisation is re-creating a comparable experience, not necessarily a perfectly accurate text, for its target users. With this in mind, specific examples are examined using Vermeer's skopos theory and Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication as frameworks, focusing on changes found in the translated version, and how they can be explained. The results show that some are deliberate adjustments, notably some of the game's humorous remarks and how the translators handle Japanese gendered speech. However, many of the changes are ultimately mistakes: some of them stem from confusion over the Japanese writing system, while others are due to flaws in the localisation process itself, or, more rarely, the translators possessing inadequate background knowledge. In conclusion, the study shows that localisation of video games deserves more attention from a translation studies perspective, not only because of their popularity, but also because they are capable of delivering rich narratives, and because they present both familiar and unique challenges to translators.

**Keywords:** Japanese, video games, localisation, translation, foreignisation, domestication, male/female language

# Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Abbreviations .....	2
<b>2. Aim.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Theory .....</b>	<b>3</b>
3.1 The skopos theory .....	4
3.2 Foreignisation and domestication.....	4
<b>4. Previous research .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. Method.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6. Material .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>7. Definitions .....</b>	<b>8</b>
7.1 Video games .....	8
7.2 RPG's.....	9
7.3 Final Fantasy .....	10
7.4 Localisation .....	12
<b>8. Analysis .....</b>	<b>13</b>
8.1. Proper nouns.....	14
8.2. Male and female speech .....	19
8.3 Culture-specific terms .....	25
8.4 Humour.....	28
8.5 Notable mistakes .....	31
<b>9. Summary and conclusion.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>10. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>41</b>

# 1. Introduction

Whenever mentioning that I have done some work as a translator, I always get the impression that people perceive translation as a rather simple process, that basically, if you are fluent in the two languages involved, surely there cannot be any major problems. Indeed, I too have found myself yelling at subtitling mistakes countless times, wondering how one could fail at something so ostensibly straightforward as translating. The truth is, translation almost invariably involves many layers of consideration; deciding whether to convey the essence or the literal meaning of what is said, whether something sounds natural or not, whether something may not be clear in the target language without additional explanation, etc. Total mastery of both the source language and target language does not guarantee a perfect or even good translation, depending on the context. Furthermore, even a truly excellent translation will never be a perfect replication of the original in every sense. This means that a translator must prioritise certain aspects over others, and I would like to see which aspects tend to be prioritised in video games, primarily in practice but also in theory.

I have been playing video games for as long as I can remember, everything from the primitive two-dimensional games of the 80's to today's more cinematic three-dimensional experiences. Video games have over the last 10 years become a truly enormous industry, with sales figures matching or even eclipsing those of the film industry, and the budgets for making these games are no different; the recently released *Grand Theft Auto V* had a budget higher than that of any feature film to date. Even so, video games have struggled to break out of their stereotypical designation as a mindless form of entertainment, made predominantly for teenage boys with too much time on their hands. It is only quite recently that video games have begun to be accepted as something worthy of consideration from an artistic and academic standpoint. The automatic stigma that was previously associated with video games (and which is indeed still prevalent to some extent) has always frustrated me greatly, the idea that one of my main interests in life, shared by so many others, is not taken seriously.

Translation studies concerning video games are important for several reasons: (1) video games are widespread in the community and have tremendous impact, (2) the work done on this subject has so far been rather scarce, (3) video games possess certain characteristics that set them apart from other forms of media. In video games, relative to books, and to a lesser extent film, language is secondary to other aspects in terms of presenting the experience that their creators want to convey; the primary experience comes from the gameplay. Moreover,

current debate notwithstanding, games are still considered entertainment first, art a distant second. Perhaps for these reasons, game translation tends to take more liberties with the source material, as long as it manages to convey the same essential experience to the player, to the point where video game translation is more commonly referred to as localisation<sup>1</sup>. As the name implies, localisation involves making the game seem like a product of the local culture, and making the game feel as relatable to consumers playing a localised version as it does for those playing the original version. As such, there are bound to be many things that are removed, added and adjusted in video game translations, sometimes deliberately and sometimes simply because there is no other way.

I want to know what problems arise when translating games and how translators handle them, and the benefit of being able to look at a Japanese game is that I believe language and cultural aspects will become especially apparent, leading to potentially interesting conclusions about the localisation process of video games.

## 1.1. Abbreviations

A number of specific abbreviations will be used frequently throughout this text, and in order to facilitate the reading experience these will be listed here.

- RPG: Role-playing game, referring to the video game genre rather than the more general term.
- NPC: Non-player character, a term referring to characters in a video game that cannot be controlled by the player.
- AAVE: African-American Vernacular English, a linguistic variety of English.
- ST: Source text, i.e. the original version of a text.
- RT: Romanised text, i.e. the source text spelled out using the Roman alphabet.
- TT: Target text, i.e. the translated version of a text.
- AT: Author's translation, referring to the author's own attempt to translate the source text.

For the sake of clarity, all of these abbreviations will be explained again, and in slightly more detail, in the respective sections that they are first introduced.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 6 (2006): 10-21.

## 2. Aim

The aim of this study is to determine what kind of difficulties arise when translating a video game, how translators choose to handle these, and what their choices might be motivated by. To this end I will examine both the original Japanese version and the translated American version of a well-known RPG (role-playing game), *Final Fantasy VII*. Over the course of this study, I also hope to learn whether video game localisation possesses any specific features as it relates to other forms of translation. However, examining this closely would broaden the scope of this study significantly, as it would require extensive knowledge of other fields of translation, their respective characteristics, and perhaps even a full-scale comparative analysis. This means that while I consider it a point of interest, I will nonetheless not attempt to reach any decisive conclusions regarding it in this study; I might, however, depending on my findings, be driven to pursue this subject in further studies.

I have selected four different areas to examine, based on what, through my own experience of Japanese, I believe might be problematic for translators to handle: proper nouns, male/female speech, culture-specific terms and humour. I will also be looking at whether there are any notable mistranslations in the script. The core of this study is ultimately video game translation and mapping out its difficulties, making it necessary to examine several linguistic areas rather than focusing on just one, such as male/female speech. The following research questions will guide me throughout this study:

- Does the translated version, generally speaking, manage to comparably reproduce the experience provided by the original version?
- Does the translated script contain any notable changes or adjustments from the original script? If so, how can these be explained?
- Are there any significant mistranslations, i.e. ones where the source text has been completely misinterpreted or misrepresented? If so, how can these be explained?

## 3. Theory

The field of translation studies as a whole has produced a wealth of research and theories, some of the more pertinent to this study being Hans J. Vermeer's skopos theory (1978) and

Lawrence Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication (2008). The most prominent shared element of these theories is their emphasis on the importance of culture and context when translating. However, more generally speaking, their core concepts are quite different, so I will now briefly present the central ideas of these theories.

### **3.1 The skopos theory**

The skopos theory argues that the central issue when translating is the intended purpose of the target text, this is referred to as the text's *skopos*. Rather than adhering strictly to the source text at all costs, the needs of the client, and in turn the prospective consumer of the translated work, is prioritised. The theory posits two additional principles so as to not completely undermine the idea of translation as something ultimately dependent on its source text; the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. The coherence rule states that the target text must be coherent enough to be considered comprehensible to its intended users, even after factoring in their respective cultural contexts, background knowledge and individual circumstances. The fidelity rule states that even though the text's *skopos* is the translator's top priority, some essential relationship between source and target text must be maintained.<sup>2</sup>

### **3.2 Foreignisation and domestication**

Lawrence Venuti makes the following assertion in his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*: "Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text with a text that is intelligible to the translating-language reader.". He then goes on to lament how translation all too often emphasises fluency and elimination of foreign elements at the cost of not being able to convey the cultural and linguistic essence of the source work. He refers to this process as domestication, where fitting the source text into the domestic culture of the target text takes precedence over preserving the unique foreign elements of the text, resulting in translations so fluent that they come across as though they had originally been written in the target language. Venuti views this as a problem because this domestication process is typical of English translations and thus cultural values portrayed in translated texts tend to reflect those of British and American culture. He

---

<sup>2</sup> Schäffner, Christina. "Skopos theory." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, London & New York: Routledge* (1998): 235-38.

therefore advocates foreignisation in which the translator aims to preserve cultural and linguistic elements, not by succumbing to reproducing the source text in the most literal manner possible, but rather through experimenting with ways of using e.g. different styles, dialects and vernaculars in order to convey the source text's unique characteristics.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that a certain degree of creative freedom should be afforded to the translator, an idea prevalent in video game localisation as well<sup>4</sup>.

## 4. Previous research

As mentioned earlier, translation studies of video games specifically have thus far been rather limited. However, researchers Carmen Mangiron and Minako O'Hagan have written a number of articles on the subject, in which they highlight the specific features of video game translation and in doing so demonstrate why it is a field worthy of more attention. Of particular interest as it relates to me and this essay, is a case study they performed in 2006, which compares the English translation of the games *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy X-2* with their respective original versions, and provides various examples to illustrate the challenges faced by video game translators. I believe this will serve as a very valuable resource and point of reference throughout my work in examining *Final Fantasy VII*. Stephen Mandiberg has also published several interesting articles on video game localisation, arguing that it is, as currently constituted, fundamentally flawed. He claims that localisation all but ignores linguistic differences in the name of creating the "same" experience across all versions of the game, a method heretofore deemed acceptable due to the status of games as pure entertainment. Video game localisation should instead be treated as the complex process that it is, beginning with embracing the concepts of translation rather than localisation, i.e. attempting to surmount linguistic differences rather than ignore them, and trying to re-create original versions, even though this process tends to produce imperfect results. To illustrate these points he examines the RPG franchise *Kingdom Hearts*, an especially difficult case because it mixes elements from Square-produced games and Disney movies, blurring the line between original and localised content.

---

<sup>3</sup> Venuti, Lawrence. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge, 2008, p. 14-19

<sup>4</sup> Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 6 (2006): 10-21.



While the amount of research specifically concerning video game localisation is scarce, studies in somewhat related fields, such as fantasy literature and anime, are a bit more common. In an article comparing two Chinese translations of *The Lord of the Rings*, Li Hong-Man found that the original translation had handled many genre-specific terms poorly, possibly due to a lack of background knowledge of the fantasy genre, thereby highlighting the need for specialised translators. Two other studies, one by Mie Hiramoto analysing the Japanese and English versions of the anime *Cowboy Bebop*, and another by Miyako Inoue examining the English and Japanese versions of the classic film *Gone with The Wind*, address how translators handle the Japanese language's use of male and female speech. Interestingly, some similarities can be found in how these same issues have been approached in the localisation of *Final Fantasy VII*.

## 5. Method

This study will examine and compare the translated American version and original Japanese version of the video game *Final Fantasy VII*. The script contains over 100,000 words of text, a corpus somewhat too large to feasibly analyse within a more limited study such as this one. Therefore, only dialogue from the first disc of the game, which comprises around half of the main storyline, and in turn, a little over 50,000 words, will be examined. Exceptions will be made only for proper nouns, as finding names of e.g. characters and weapons does not necessitate reading the entire respective sections of the script in which they appear. This in turn means that looking at proper nouns from the entire game should not take significantly more time than examining only those that appear in the first half of the game. Additions, omissions, changes and adjustments found in the translated script will then be selected for further analysis based on (1) whether they are relevant to the five areas this study will examine, i.e. proper nouns, male-female speech, culture-specific terms, humour and notable mistakes, (2) whether such analysis might yield interesting observations or conclusions about translation of video games or the Japanese language. These conditions mean that, although any adjustments found while reading the respective scripts will be noted in order to form an overall impression of the translated version, all of them will not necessarily be presented in the thesis itself.

To optimise my own understanding and subsequent analysis of the script, I will be using *The Routledge Course in Japanese Translation* by Yoko Hasegawa as a reference when examining specific examples; although I do have previous translating experience and my level of Japanese should be adequate for this study, my experience of Japanese translation specifically is rather limited, hence it should be useful to have some kind of template. However, this book mainly explains certain differences and potential problem sources when translating Japanese, and how these tend to be dealt with, as such it serves more as a kind of manual than as the theoretical framework for this study. In order to reach conclusions regarding the overall impression of the translated script, and through that, the essence of video game translation itself, I will be applying the theories of Vermeer and Venuti respectively. Using these theories as a framework, I hope to get some idea of what the main priorities of video game translators are. Previous studies performed by Mangiron and O'Hagan will likely also provide insight into this, particularly the thought process involved when making adjustments to the translated script, given that O'Hagan worked on the Spanish localisation of the game *Final Fantasy X*, and thus has first-hand experience of what kind of reasoning is applied when facing challenges in translating video games.

One additional aspect that should be noted here is that while video games are a visual medium, and there may indeed be imagery in *Final Fantasy VII* that might, as it were, have been lost in translation, this study will be based mainly on analysis of the game's script, referencing visual aspects only when necessary. Such aspects may e.g. include the appearance of characters, as this constitutes one facet of how they are portrayed, and may be relevant to analyse their manner of speech. However, analysing the game's visual elements more extensively would introduce another dimension to this study, diminishing its focus and potentially detracting from the final product.

## **6. Material**

The game *Final Fantasy VII* was chosen as the subject of this study for several reasons, the most obvious one being that it is a Japanese game. Studying how an American game is translated into Japanese would be significantly more difficult than the inverse proposition, perhaps even impossible, as translation analysis requires nearly flawless command of the target language. The secondary reason is that the game is an RPG, meaning that it involves a

relatively deep story and characters with well-established personalities, and includes much more text than games of other genres, providing more material for analysis. The game is also very well-known, well-reviewed, and had a rather high profile at the time of its release, meaning that it is likely that the localisation of the game received a comparatively professional treatment, in which case the game might be viewed as a representative, well-made translation when attempting a more general analysis. 16 years have passed since its original release, which means that the game does not include any voice acting. I consider this an advantage for this particular study, as examining both speech and text might complicate matters and call for analysis beyond the intended scope of this essay. Finally, this is a game I have previously played through and finished myself, meaning that I am already familiar with the story, characters, setting etc, which makes it easier for me to dive straight into analysing the script.

## **7. Definitions**

Before delving into the analysis portion of this study, some definitions of core concepts and information relating to its subject matter will be presented. This should help put things into context and overall make this text more comprehensible, particularly to those with limited or no experience of video games.

### **7.1 Video games**

Video games are a relatively young medium, having been around only since the early 1970's. The first commercially successful video game, the coin-operated arcade game *Pong*, was released in 1972, and involved two lines (representing ping-pong paddles) bouncing a dot (representing a ball) back and forth across a black-and-white screen. Since then, video games have evolved by leaps and bounds, providing increasingly realistic and immersive gameplay, and more recently, almost cinematic experiences with regard to story and presentation. The term video game itself has become rather vague over the last few years, given the explosion of mobile gaming and the remarkable multitude of genres available, ranging from games with exceptionally simplistic gameplay and no narrative whatsoever, to deeply complex games with full-fledged storylines and settings. Moreover, the issue of defining video games is

further complicated by games such as *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* and *Beyond: Two Souls*, where gameplay in a more action-oriented sense is substituted for a type of user interaction best described as something akin to an interactive novel or movie. Consequently, postulating a clear definition of video games is challenging, but the one essential aspect in any form of the medium is player agency, which is to say that video games, unlike other mediums, allow for the user to influence what happens within it. Thus, in a very broad sense, video games can be defined as a digital medium wherein the user manipulates images on a screen, usually as a way of competing or progressing within the confines of a specific scenario or ruleset. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that a distinction is often made between computer games and video games, particularly among gaming enthusiasts. This, however, relates to the differences between the two in terms of user interface, performance and selection of games; the basic concept of both remains the same, and hence the aforementioned definition applies to computer games as well as video games. A majority of video games in the sense outlined above are of little or no interest from a translation studies perspective, since they do not include almost any dialogue or text. Nevertheless, many games across several genres, have scripts numbering hundreds of pages, leaving plenty of room for analysis. Role-playing games (abbreviated RPG's) in particular tend to highlight the issues faced when localising video games, as they usually involve complex storylines and vast amounts of text<sup>5</sup>.

## 7.2 RPG's

The term RPG can sometimes refer to a kind of board game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, where the central idea is that all participants embody the role of a character, acting out different scenarios over the course of the game. In the context of video games, however, this same term is used to describe games characterised by a number of typical features, for example:

- Heavy emphasis on story and character development.
- A main protagonist accompanied by several friends and/or comrades, form a so-called party. Usually, the main protagonist serves as the player's avatar (which is to say the

---

<sup>5</sup>Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 6 (2006): 10-21.

player's graphical representation), while other party members constitute important secondary characters both in terms of story and gameplay.

- Party members grow stronger throughout the game by defeating enemies and finding various items and weapons, allowing them to boost various numerical values such as attack power and defensive strength.
- High degree of player agency, allowing the player to make minor and/or major story-related decisions and to customise strengths and weaknesses of different party members.
- Gameplay often involves exploring a large in-game world, talking to many non-player characters (NPC's), and fighting enemies through the use of text-based commands.
- Usually takes place in alternate universes, a very common example being some kind of medieval fantasy setting, with magic also being a recurring element.

This breakdown is mainly applicable for single-player RPG's, meaning that e.g. the immensely popular *World of Warcraft*, which is a multi-player RPG, only fits certain parts of this template. *Final Fantasy VII* is a very typical single-player RPG, covering more or less all the major hallmarks of the genre listed here, and the *Final Fantasy* series as a whole is perhaps the best known representative of the genre in America and Europe.

### 7.3 Final Fantasy

Since its inception, the *Final Fantasy* franchise has spawned over 30 games, around half of which are considered main entries in the series, and the rest being different kinds of spin-offs. Its cumulative sales thus far total over 100 million copies sold<sup>6</sup>, with *Final Fantasy VII*, being the most popular game in the series, accounting for about 10 million of them<sup>7</sup>. The games were originally developed by the Japanese company Square, but in 2003 Square merged with their rival company Enix, forming Square Enix, which has carried on production of the franchise since then. Interestingly, there are different accounts of where the name of the series originated from; one story holds that it was a result of lead designer Hironobu Sakaguchi giving game development one last try before going back to university to finish his studies instead<sup>8</sup>. Another explanation, which long-time series composer Nobuo Uematsu attests to,

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.webcitation.org/60eGChfx6>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.vgchartz.com/article/250920/top-10-in-sales-final-fantasy/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.develop-online.net/news/sakaguchi-discusses-the-development-of-final-fantasy/0102088>

relates to the state of the company at the time; Square was near bankruptcy and *Final Fantasy* was to be their final game, their last attempt at turning things around<sup>9</sup>. There are some common elements appearing throughout the series, but these are not as instantly recognisable as in the cases of e.g. *Pokémon* or *Mario*, two franchises associated very closely with their respective mascot characters. *Final Fantasy* games introduce new worlds, characters and even certain gameplay systems with almost every new instalment, and the only aspects that stay fundamentally the same every time are RPG tropes like the ones listed above, along with a few very inconsequential features, like the recurrence of fictional yellow birds called "Chocobo". The first game in the series, *Final Fantasy*, was released for the Nintendo Famicom in Japan in 1987, but a localised version did not reach North America until 1990, and it was never released in Europe at all until 2003, when it was part of a worldwide re-release for Sony PlayStation. This was a constant theme in the earlier days of the series; of the first six games released in Japan, only three came to North America within the same timeframe, and none of them originally reached Europe at all. *Final Fantasy VII* was the first game to be released worldwide somewhat simultaneously, reaching both Japanese, North American, and European shelves in 1997<sup>10</sup>. Since then, most subsequent games in the series have been released more or less concurrently across all territories. It helped popularise the RPG genre in the West<sup>11</sup>, as evidenced by North America and Europe accounting for over half its lifetime sales<sup>12</sup>. As a result, many Westerners have come to view *Final Fantasy* as the quintessential RPG franchise. In Japan, however, the *Dragon Quest* series of games, originally developed by Enix starting in 1986 (and now by Square Enix, along with various other studios) arguably holds this distinction, with its creator even characterising its popularity as a cultural phenomenon<sup>13</sup>. What sets *Final Fantasy* apart from its competitors is its popularity in both America and Europe on the one hand, and Japan on the other. For reference, the most popular entry in the *Dragon Quest* series, *Dragon Quest IX*, has sold around 5.3 million copies worldwide, but only slightly over a million of those were outside of Japan<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2009/07/final-fantasy/>

<sup>10</sup> Exact release dates, JP: 1997-01-31, NA: 1997-09-07, EU: 1997-11-01

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.1up.com/features/final-fantasy-vii-quinceanera>

<http://www.1up.com/features/squaresoft-localization>

<sup>12</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20080801053240/http://na.square-enix.com/e306/titles/ccff/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20100614061622/http://plaza.bunka.go.jp/museum/meister/entertainment/vol2/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/pdf/news/20100518\\_02.pdf](http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/pdf/news/20100518_02.pdf)

<http://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2011/110426e.pdf#page=5>

*Final Fantasy VII* takes place in an alternate universe referred to as The Planet (although its formal name has since been confirmed as Gaia), which incorporates several fantasy elements such as magic and monsters, but at the same time features technology more or less comparable to that of present-day industrialised countries. This technology is powered by a fictional energy resource, known as Mako, roughly analogous to oil or nuclear power; its formation and extraction processes are reminiscent of oil, whereas its effects on humans and the environment more closely mirror those of nuclear power. Mako is primarily harvested and refined by the Shinra Electric Power Company, an immensely powerful corporation that essentially rules Gaia and the leaders of which serve as major antagonists in the game. Many of the protagonists are members of a resistance group called AVALANCHE, who carry out acts of eco-terrorism as a way of protesting Shinra's excessive use of Mako energy, as they claim that this process is gradually draining away the life of the planet. The game starts out in the capital city of Midgar and initially revolves around AVALANCHE's efforts to topple Shinra; however, eventually the true antagonist, Sephiroth, is introduced. He is a genetically enhanced soldier formerly affiliated with Shinra, and his ultimate goal is to bring about an apocalypse and gain divine powers in the process, hence the game's final objective is to stop this from happening.

The player controls Cloud Strife, an emotionally jaded mercenary formerly employed by Shinra, who has recently joined AVALANCHE instead. While Cloud does serve as the player's avatar when traversing the game world and interacting with the game's numerous non-player characters (NPC's, i.e. all characters that cannot be controlled by the player), the player is actually guiding a larger party of characters throughout the game. This becomes apparent whenever entering a battle sequence or story-related scenes where other party members recruited up to that point can appear, depending on the situation. It is also worth noting here that *Final Fantasy VII* is a fairly linear game. The player can often select how to answer certain questions, and these answers in turn generate different dialogues, sometimes even influencing minor events in the story, but the game's overall story progression cannot be impacted by the player in any significant way.

## **7.4 Localisation**

There are two models of localisation, outsourcing and in-house. The outsourcing model involves sending files needing translation to freelance translators or specialised localisation

companies, which they then work on parallel to development of the game. As external parties, they usually do not get a playable copy of the game; they instead get packages of so-called "assets", such as text assets, graphical assets (which may include imagery that must also be adjusted), etc. In the in-house model, the localisation team is part of the company making the game, which means that it has access to the actual product during development. This in turn means that there is no room for confusion in terms of understanding the context of any given dialogue or message, nor is there any risk of misrepresenting things such as plot elements or character names. The downside of the in-house model is mostly economic, not least due to it being more time-consuming than its alternative. Square used the outsourcing model for *Final Fantasy VII* but opted to create an in-house localisation team for subsequent entries in the series, due to overwhelmingly negative feedback to the game's Western localisation (primarily the non-English versions).<sup>15</sup> Michael Baskett was the only translator at Square's North American offices working on *Final Fantasy VII*. In an interview with video game website 1UP.com, his successor Richard Honeywood details some of the challenges Baskett faced; while he did get some external help from Japanese speakers, he also had to edit the text they submitted. Moreover, there was no real review or editing process involved in the same way that there would typically be for a present-day project, and the development teams at Square at the time were not used to dealing with localisation, creating a lack of communication.<sup>16</sup>

Localisation teams tend to opt for a domestication-oriented translation approach. This is because localisation primarily concerns itself with the "look and feel" of the final product, which is expected to be similar to equivalent games found in the target culture.<sup>17</sup>

## 8. Analysis

In this section I will look at several problem areas of video game localisation, particularly as they relate to *Final Fantasy VII*, by analysing specific examples from the game's script. In most cases, certain theoretical concepts are necessary to fully understand these analyses or

---

<sup>15</sup> Hevian, Carmen Mangiro. "Video games localisation: Posing new challenges to the translator." *Perspectives* 14.4 (2007): 306-323.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.1up.com/features/squaresoft-localization>

<sup>17</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Carmen Mangiron. *Game Localization: Translating for the global digital entertainment industry*. Vol. 106. John Benjamins Publishing, 2013, p. 159.



why the selected examples would even elicit examination in the first place. Therefore, any such essential background information will also be presented where relevant.

## 8.1. Proper nouns

In *The Routledge Course in Japanese Translation*, Hasegawa states that dictionary definitions of words merely describe their meaning potential, and that it is only when put into context that they truly gain meaning. Hence, meaning could be viewed as a process rather than as an inherent characteristic of language. Hasegawa goes on to say that meaning in this sense of the word lies at the heart of most translation problems, and provides an overview of a number of different kinds of meaning.<sup>18</sup>

Proper nouns, i.e. different kinds of names of places, people, companies etc, can often create difficulties when translating texts, particularly when they are not known to readers of the target text. This is because names may carry a certain meaning to those reading the source text which is unfamiliar to those reading the target text. Naturally, many names can simply be left exactly as they are; for example, the Japanese name for Harry Potter is the language's closest possible approximation of that particular name, ハリーポッター (Harī Pottā). However, in many situations, a straight translation of proper nouns may create a comprehension gap for readers of the target text. One such issue occurs when a name mentioned in the source text contains some kind of cultural reference or connotes certain characteristics, easily recognisable to readers of the source text but lost on those reading the target text. For example, if an English text were to describe a character by saying "A man much like Vidkun Quisling", a Chinese person reading a direct translation, would likely not know who Quisling was, and therefore not have any idea what this means, whereas many Scandinavian readers would recognise this as a way of saying that the man in question is deceitful. There are several ways of working around this issue, one being to explain the meaning, rather than translate it, by simply saying "A deceitful man" and removing the reference altogether. Another method would be to substitute the name given in the source text with another name, one which conveys a comparable impression to the readers of the target text. Hasegawa uses an example from the novel 69, where the translator elected to substitute the name of a Japanese actress,

---

<sup>18</sup> Hasegawa, Yoko. *The Routledge course in Japanese translation*. Routledge, 2013, p. 29-33.

Ruriko Asaoka, for Brigitte Bardot, as they were both popular actresses with similar public images during the 1960's.<sup>19</sup>

One of the main actors throughout the plot of *Final Fantasy VII* is a powerful company called Shinra. The English name is simply a phonetic translation of the original name, 神羅 (pronounced *shinra*), which consists of kanji meaning "god" and "silk". The name Shinra has no meaning in English, and indeed, this particular combination of kanji has no specific meaning in Japanese either. However, going only by the reading, the name echoes a well-known Japanese proverb of Buddhist origin, pronounced *shinra banshō*, and written as 森羅万象, which more or less means "all creation"<sup>20</sup>. While the kanji used for *shinra* here is different, this sort of wordplay is not uncommon in Japanese as the language contains an exceptional amount of homonyms; mixing and matching kanji with identical readings but different meanings is for example popular in Japanese advertising<sup>21</sup>. The original name's inclusion of the kanji for god, and its connection to the *shinra banshō* proverb, combine to convey an image of power or ubiquity in the original Japanese version, which would seem appropriate, since the corporation bearing the name has enormous influence over the whole world it is in. Whether this was intended or not, the fact that Shinra is one of relatively few proper nouns in the game to be written in Chinese characters (most are written in *katakana*, an alphabet mostly used for loan words and foreign names) supports the idea that there was thought behind the name and that it was not just randomly chosen.

The choice to simply translate the name phonetically results in all these potential connotations of the original being lost. Looking at this from a skopos theory perspective, the phonetic translation of the name is less than optimal, as it eschews the needs of the target culture in favour of a desire to not misrepresent the source text (by giving the company a different, more relatable name). Still, it is an understandable choice, given that it would be difficult to spell out the context of the name, and re-naming it entirely might not be possible.

Another interesting example is the name of a *shuriken* (a Japanese weapon sometimes also referred to as "ninja star" or "throwing star") used by one of the protagonists, called 卍手裏剣 (pronounced *manji shuriken*) in the original Japanese version. This actually translates to "swastika shuriken", but in the translated version it is instead referred to as "spiral shuriken".

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> [http://kotowaza.avaloky.com/pv\\_yoj206.html](http://kotowaza.avaloky.com/pv_yoj206.html) The Japanese explanation here roughly describes the meaning as "all that exists in heaven and on earth, and all things and events of the ever-changing reality found in between"

<sup>21</sup> Gustafsson, Johan. "Puns in Japanese advertisements.". Lund University, BA thesis, 2010.

In Eastern culture, a swastika is a religious symbol of auspiciousness, whereas in Western culture, the word swastika is virtually exclusively associated with Nazi ideology and viewed as a symbol of oppression. Therefore, the name was almost certainly changed so as to not offend Western consumers. This, in other words, constitutes a very clear-cut example of the translators having adjusted the target text for its intended users. Censorship of this kind is hardly a unique occurrence in the realm of video game localisation, for example, the original plot of the 1988 NES game *Bionic Commando* involved Nazis trying to revive Hitler, something which its Japanese title even directly referenced, whereas the American version removed all such references and replaced the villains' recurring swastika insignia with an eagle-shaped one. Square-produced RPG's have also seen their fair share of censorship over the years; all games in the *Final Fantasy* series have featured a magic spell originally known as *hōrī* (katakana spelling of "holy"), but in order to avoid religious connotations, the spell's name was translated as "fade", "white" and "pearl" in the first three games to reach North American shores. Stephen Mandiberg mentions another interesting example in an article where he criticises the very idea of localisation by examining its shortcomings in maintaining essential themes of Square Enix/Disney collaboration *Kingdom Hearts II*. The game is Japanese, but features characters and plot elements from well-known Disney movies, i.e. American source texts. In the Japanese version of the game, Will Turner, a character from the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* threatens to commit suicide, in a scene directly referencing the movie. This has been omitted in the American version of the game, probably to avoid raising the game's age rating.<sup>22</sup>

The aforementioned examples describe two instances in *Final Fantasy VII* where the translation fails to reproduce Japanese cultural connotations present in the source text, whether deliberately as in the case of *manji shuriken*, or as a result of there seemingly being no better viable option, as in the case of Shinra. A much more basic and less subtle problem in translating Japanese games, however, stems from the Japanese language's use of three different alphabets, *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*, none of which match up perfectly with the Roman one. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are phonetic alphabets, each consisting of 46 characters representing the 46 most basic phonemes in the Japanese language; phonetically speaking, they are the same, but *hiragana* is used much more generally, whereas *katakana* is predominantly used when writing foreign names and loanwords. Very often, using only these

---

<sup>22</sup> Mandiberg, Stephen. "Translation (is) not localization: Language in gaming." University of California, San Diego, 2009.

46 phonemes, it is impossible for the Japanese language to accurately approximate the original pronunciation of e.g. foreign names. The most apparent example of this is perhaps the absence of differentiation between the letter "l" and "r" in Japanese, which is particularly confusing for translators when handling names given in *katakana* in the original Japanese text. A well-known example of this problem in the context of video game translation can be found in the popular game *Mega Man 2* (known as *ROCKMAN 2* in Japan). One of the game's characters is called トマスライト (pronounced *tomasu raito*) in the original version. *Raito* could be interpreted as Light, Right, or even Wright, and was translated as Light in the American version. Later entries in this game series have, however, shown that the intended spelling was in fact Right. Judging only by the original spelling, there was no way of knowing which was correct; this kind of mistranslation is thus more an indication of the limitations of the Japanese language with regard to pronunciation than it is a product of translator incompetence. A simple example of this confusion between "l" and "r" can also be found in one of the boss characters in *Final Fantasy VII*, an amoral mad scientist originally named ヘレティック宝条 (pronounced *heretikku houjou*). An accurate transliteration of this would have been "Heretic Hōjō", but the American version translated it as the somewhat nonsensical "Hellelic Hojo", perhaps thinking that including the word "hell" in his name would make it seem more menacing.

One of the most contentious points of the original English translation of *Final Fantasy VII* involves the spelling of the name of one of the main characters, known as エアリスゲインズブルー (pronounced *earisu geinzubūru*) in the Japanese version. In the game's original American release, this was translated as Aeris Gainsborough. Since then, *Final Fantasy VII* has spawned several spin-off games and related media, many of which refer to the character as Aerith instead of Aeris. Japanese has no equivalent for the pronunciation of "th", and the closest possible approximation is "su", meaning that both Aeris and Aerith are valid transliterations of the name. According to the game's developers, however, the name was supposed to be Aerith, because the name was created by taking the word "Earth" and changing it a bit<sup>23</sup>; this likely alludes to how the character has a strong connection with the planet itself. The name Aeris is thus a mistranslation of sorts, but one that is understandable given the ambiguous Japanese spelling of the name. Moreover, one could argue that the translated name fulfils a comparable purpose to the original in terms of relating to the

---

<sup>23</sup> Famitsu, ed. *Final Fantasy VII Kaitai Shinsho*. Famitsu, 1997, p. 14.

character; Aeris resembles the word "heiress", which works well since the character is the last remnant of a powerful tribe.

*Final Fantasy VII* is set in an alternate universe, and as such, does not include any clear references to actually existing famous people or institutions. This leaves little room for implementing the translating strategy, put forth by Hasegawa and outlined above, wherein a proper noun is substituted for a different one, more recognisable to the target culture. That being said, this way of thinking can be observed to some degree when analysing the Japanese and English names of one of the game's final bosses, an iteration of the game's antagonist, Sephiroth, referred to in the original version as リバースセフィロス (pronounced *ribāsu sefirosu*). There are two phonetically valid ways of transliterating *ribāsu*, one being "reverse" and the other "rebirth". In the American version, the name was translated as "Bizarro Sephiroth", the "Bizarro" part of the name in all likelihood being a reference to a character from *Superman* comics who was designed to be a mirror image of Superman, and whose name is sometimes associated with opposite or reverse in American popular culture<sup>24</sup>. Such a specifically American reference could be viewed as both a clear adjustment for the benefit of the target culture and a way of domesticating the name, particularly since "Reverse Sephiroth" sounds rather unnatural. Mangiron and O'Hagan point out that this is a translation strategy used frequently in the *Final Fantasy* series, and demonstrates this using an example from the American version of *Final Fantasy X-2*, where one character refers to a concert as "Yunapalooza", combining the name of that game's main character with the popular American music festival Lollapalooza<sup>25</sup>. What makes the name "Bizarro Sephiroth" especially interesting though, is the fact that the translators probably got it wrong from the beginning; "Rebirth Sephiroth" was almost certainly the intended reading of the name. Sephiroth has at that point in the story just been reborn as a kind of deity and the musical theme accompanying the battle, 神の誕生 (pronounced *kami no tanjō*), meaning "Birth of a God", reinforces this fact. This example therefore not only provides insight into the thought process of the translator, but also demonstrates the room for misunderstanding created by the linguistic characteristics of Japanese.

---

<sup>24</sup> The very popular TV series *Seinfeld* aired an episode titled *The Bizarro Jerry* about one year prior to the American release of *Final Fantasy VII*. In it, the word is used synonymously with "reverse" or "opposite".

<sup>25</sup> Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation*6 (2006): 10-21.

## 8.2. Male and female speech

An obvious, yet very challenging, aspect of translation is that the target language sometimes lacks any equivalent or adequate facsimile for a word appearing in the source text. One of the most problematic areas in this regard, as it relates to Japanese, involves gender-specific words. A number of words in the Japanese language are essentially feminine or masculine, not in a grammatical sense but rather in terms of the gender image they convey to the listener. To illustrate this point, one might compare English and Japanese first person pronouns. In English, "I" is used generally by more or less everyone when speaking in the first person, and is in this sense gender-neutral. In Japanese, on the other hand, there are several gender-specific alternatives. *Watashi* and *watakushi* can be used by either gender, but the words *ore* and *boku* indicate that the speaker is male, whereas *atashi* carries the implication that the speaker is female. This means that just from hearing/seeing certain keywords such as these, the listener/reader can determine whether the speaker is using a male or female manner of speech (and in most cases, whether the speaker is a man or a woman). The concept of male and female language is by no means limited to Japanese<sup>26</sup>, but certain words themselves being gender-specific is, at least compared to most Western languages, a unique trait of Japanese and thus potentially difficult to handle when translating. In this chapter, I will examine the use of male and female speech in *Final Fantasy VII* and how this has been handled in the American localisation. In some cases, the localisation team seems to have made a concerted effort to assimilate the speech style given in the source text. In other cases, however, no gender-specific overtones whatsoever can be discerned in the American version.

Some of the more easily recognisable gender-specific words in Japanese include first person pronouns and so-called sentence final particles. In Japanese, particles are grammatical words that help link sentences together, for example *ni*, which can indicate destination or direction and works rather similarly to the English word "to", or *no*, which denotes genitive case and thus serves a similar purpose to "of". Sentence final particles, on the other hand, tend to alter the tone or even meaning of the entire preceding statement. Adding the particle *ka* to the end of a sentence turns a declarative statement into a question, *yo* makes it informative, while *ne* means that the speaker is seeking the listener's agreement. Other sentence final particles, such as *ze* and *wa* respectively imply that the speaker is male or female. Here are some of the most

---

<sup>26</sup> See for example Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *Language and woman's place*. Vol. 56. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

frequently appearing gender-specific words in *Final Fantasy VII*, together with short explanations for each:

- *Ore* is a male first person pronoun. It can be used without negative connotations when speaking with close friends, but may in other situations be considered arrogant or rude, and should not be used when addressing people of higher social status.
- *Atashi* is a female first person pronoun used primarily in informal situations. It is somewhat softer and more familiar than the more formal and gender-neutral alternative *watashi*.
- *Wa* is a sentence-final particle that adds emotion or an air of femininity, and is therefore mainly used by women.
- *Ze* and *zo* are similar to the previously mentioned particle *yo* but are more forceful and commanding, and almost exclusively used by men.

*Final Fantasy VII* includes hundreds of non-player characters (NPC's), many of whom are only encountered once and whose respective speech styles are of relatively little importance in terms of the player's overall experience of the game. Consequently, it follows naturally that the American version does not go to any great lengths to recreate the nuances of speech styles found in random encounters. With this in mind, it seems reasonable that one of the game's principal characters, present from the very beginning of the game up until the end, represents the American version's most diligent attempt to mirror male speech from the source text. The character in question, Barret Wallace, is the leader of the resistance group AVALANCHE, and speaks accordingly in the original version of the game, referring to himself as *ore* and routinely cursing, ending sentences with *ze* and *zo*, and generally exhibiting a rather brash, irreverent attitude. He bears a quite strong resemblance to the actor Mr. T (a fact also pointed out by many critics)<sup>27</sup>, which is to say he is black and muscular, sporting a hi-top fade, beard, and an often surly or angry facial expression. What is interesting is that these physical attributes also seem to have influenced the character's manner of speech in the American version of the game. The following example is taken from an exchange between Barret and Cloud early in the game. Barret has just given Cloud, whom he does not yet trust, an order to detonate a bomb in order to finish a mission. ST (source text) indicates the original Japanese script in unaltered form, RT (romanised text) is the same as ST but transliterated using Hepburn romanisation, TT (target text) indicates the American version, and AT (author's

---

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.1up.com/do/blogEntry?bId=8986639&publicUserId=5379721>  
<http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/03/29/top-10-tuesday-best-sidekicks>

translation) refers to my own translation of the source text, which aims to be as faithful as possible to the original text without having it sound exceedingly stilted.

ST: 「オレ？ オレは見張らせてもらう。おまえさんがおかしなマネをしないようにな」

RT: "Ore? Ore wa miharasete morau. Omae-san ga okashina mane o shinaiyōni na."

TT: "Jus' do it! I gotta watch to make sure you don't pull nothin'."

AT: "Me? I'll stand watch, so that you don't get up to any funny business".

The American version has Barret urging Cloud on, giving the impression that he is feeling impatient; this is not present in the original version. This is perfectly fine, since it is not at all out of character nor is it unnatural for the situation they are in. More importantly though, the US translation drops the final consonants of "Just" and "nothing" respectively, and uses a double negative for the purpose of negative concord rather than understated affirmation. These are features often associated with African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).<sup>28</sup> Throughout the game, Barret's manner of speech is consistent with AAVE, another typical example being:

ST: 「自分が元ソルジャーだからってえらそうに言うんじゃねえよ！」

RT: "Jibun ga moto sorujaa dakara tte erasōni iu n janēyo!"

TT: "Don't go thinkin' you so bad jes cuz you was in SOLDIER."

AT: "Don't talk like you're such a big shot just because you used to be in SOLDIER!"

Absence of copula ("you so") and using "was" instead of "were", are also very clear indications that the translators have aimed to make Barret speak typical AAVE<sup>29</sup>. This method of translating non-standard speech is not without precedent. For example, the Japanese translation of *Gone with the Wind* differentiates between how the film's white characters speak and how their black house slaves speak, by having all the white women use female language, and all the black women use non-female, even ungrammatical language. The

---

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, Guy, et al., eds. *African-American English: structure, history and use*. Routledge, 1998, p. 17-25, 88; Green, Lisa J. *African American English: a linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 77-80

<sup>29</sup> Bailey, Guy, et al., eds. *African-American English: structure, history and use*. Routledge, 1998, p.50; Green, Lisa J. *African American English: a linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 38



Japanese version thus more or less translates "whiteness" into "Japanese woman-ness".<sup>30</sup> By the same token, it could be said that Barret's "Japanese man-ness" has been translated into "blackness" in the American version of *Final Fantasy VII*. From a skopos theory perspective, this works very well, as it fits with the primary target culture's (America's) stereotypical image upon seeing a character like Barret. That being said, some critics have argued that Barret is portrayed as so stereotypical as to border on racism<sup>31</sup>. This criticism, while not an entirely indefensible claim, is likely due more than anything to African-American vernacular being attached to a character possessing some of the negative aspects of Barret's personality, i.e. him being angry, impatient, rude etc. In that sense, the translators' decision to have him speak AAVE only amplifies an aspect that might have been criticised either way. Barret's use of AAVE is also interesting in how it can be seen as an example of foreignisation; although it could be argued that it is in fact a case of domestication, as it changes the content of the source text into something more recognisable and relatable to the American audience, the essence of this adjustment is, at least linguistically, also entirely consistent with Venuti's idea of creatively using different styles or vernaculars to recreate unique features of the source text.

Barret is an interesting subject for examination largely because there is a consistent idea behind how he talks in both the original version and the American version. This is not equally true of the female characters, whose respective manners of speech, while admittedly not as apparently distinctive as Barret's, are treated more neutrally throughout the game. To some extent, this might be considered natural, given that what is perceived as typical female language is expressed more subtly than its male equivalent. Where a character such as Barret is outspoken and blunt, Tifa Lockhart, Cloud's childhood friend and one of the main female characters, is more considerate and reserved. Successfully conveying the latter is more difficult than the former, as it requires more nuance. Even so, there are cases where the translation seems especially straightforward. During the game's first mission, a minor character, Jessie, informs the rest of the group that something has gone wrong:

ST: 「まっずいことになっちゃったわ」

RT: "Mazzui koto ni natchatta wa."

TT: "We're in trouble."

---

<sup>30</sup> Inoue, Miyako. "Speech without a speaking body: "Japanese women's language" in translation." *Language & Communication* 23.3 (2003): 315-330.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.edge-online.com/features/why-are-black-game-characters-failing-audience/2/>  
<http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/03/06/a-history-of-insensitivity>

AT: "I'm afraid the situation has gone bad."

The Japanese line, while not a perfect representative example of typical female speech, is charged with much more emotion than its English counterpart. The original sentence includes the sentence final particle *wa*, as well as a deliberate variant spelling of the word *mazui* (which essentially means "bad") indicating that it is said with more stress than usual. In addition, *natchatta* means "has become", but with an added implication of regret, i.e. "...has regrettably become". All of these finer details are completely ignored in the American version, in which the translators opted for the admittedly natural but at the same time strictly descriptive alternative, "We're in trouble". The essential message comes across either way, but where the American version to some extent succeeds in foreignising Barret's manner of speech, the subtleties of female speech are foregone to make room for more fluent, domesticated language. Another example of this comes in a very simple phrase uttered by Tifa, in a flashback where she has just arrived late to meet Cloud.

ST: 「お・ま・た・せ」

RT: "O-ma-ta-se"

TT: "Sorry I'm late."

AT: "Sorry to keep you wai-ting..."

Tifa is heavily implied throughout the game to be romantically interested in Cloud, and the scene takes place when they are both around 16 years old. The original line has her saying *omatase* (a polite, apologetic way of saying "I kept you waiting") in a kind of cute, singing tone, articulating each syllable in turn. Again, the translation here is strictly speaking correct, but no effort has been made to recreate this detail present in the original sentence. Her way of saying the line is not without relevance to the scene in question, as it immediately establishes a tone more gentle toward Cloud than the perfectly adequate but also entirely neutral "Sorry I'm late".

In one section of the game, Cloud is forced to disguise himself as a woman in order to infiltrate a brothel. Before doing so, the player must collect accessories for him to wear, and one of these, a wig, is surprisingly found in an all-male gym, belonging to a man referred to as Big Bro. In the Japanese version, Big Bro's manner of speech is contrasted with the other gym members, as he ends sentences with the female *wa yo* or *wa ne*, whereas the others use the

male *ze*. In the American version, this detail is lost, with no clear distinction being made between Big Bro and the others. That this sort of nuance disappears may very well be more telling of the respective characteristics of the languages involved than the translation itself; what can be conveyed in a single word in Japanese may require altering the entire sentence when translated to English. Nevertheless, as it is clear that the original version makes it a point to present one male character's speech as female and that of the others as typically male, it is noteworthy that this does not seem to have been given any attention in the American version. Aside from this one instance, all characters in the game tend to speak either using neutral forms or gender-appropriate terms. This pattern is similar to how male and female language is handled in the 1998 anime *Cowboy Bebop*; a quantitative study tracked the characters' usage of gender-specific first person pronouns, second person pronouns and sentence-final particles in the Japanese version, and then compared this with how often those same characters would exhibit male and female speech patterns in the English dub. The results showed that characters almost universally speak as one would expect from their gender (neutral or gender-appropriate). One of the rare exceptions to this rule, however, occurs in an episode featuring a planet inhabited only by men, where one of the protagonists encounters a transvestite male who uses typically female language.<sup>32</sup>

Although it is difficult to see how the translators could have handled first-person pronouns otherwise, it is worth noting that all variations of them in the original Japanese have been rendered as "I" or "me" in the translated script. Aside from the aforementioned *ore*, two examples are particularly notable: firstly, the character Yuffie Kisaragi's use of *atashi*, as opposed to the other female characters who use *watashi*, perhaps to make her sound more cute or youthful, as she is younger than the others. Secondly, the antagonist Sephiroth switches from using *ore* in flashbacks to the more formal, impersonal *watashi* in later encounters; this change is meant to reflect how his personality is altered after a story event that causes him to both lose his mind and develop a god complex. These nuances are lost in the American version, but again, this is something that perhaps cannot be helped.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hiramoto, Mie. "Anime and intertextualities Hegemonic identities in Cowboy Bebop." *Pragmatics and Society* 1.2 (2010): 234-256.

### 8.3 Culture-specific terms

In the 17th century, one of the fundamental issues of translating was captured by the French scholar Gilles Ménage, when he characterised translations made by his contemporary Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt as reminiscent of a woman he knew, who was "beautiful but unfaithful". Whenever translating a text, staying overly faithful to the source text runs the risk of creating an unnatural, stilted target text, whereas opting for the opposite end of the spectrum results in a text all but divorced from the original. Hence, the most commonly used translation method is something Hasegawa refers to as equivalence, which strives to create "equivalent texts" rather than exact replications of the source text. A typical application of this method is to translate greetings and situational expressions with their functional equivalents. For example, the Swedish "Ha det så bra!" literally translates to "Have it so good!", basically meaning "I hope you will have as nice a time as possible until we meet again", but neither literal translation nor the method of explaining rather than translating works particularly well here, so instead, the equivalent phrase "Take care" would probably be used as a more natural translation. Idioms and proverbs are handled in a similar manner, using the most semantically equivalent expression rather than a direct translation. In some cases the original expression would otherwise become nonsensical in the target language, e.g. the Japanese phrase "abura o uru" , which literally means "to sell oil" but actually refers to wasting time. Others, such as the Swedish "Döm inte hunden efter pälsen", might be intelligible to English speakers even when literally translated as "Don't judge the dog by its fur", but using this translation technique it would end up in the target text as its English equivalent "Don't judge a book by its cover".<sup>33</sup>

The American version of *Final Fantasy VII* employs the equivalence technique throughout the game. This mostly works fine, but it does create some interesting examples of foreignisation and domestication. Specifically, the tendency is to domesticate when using functionally equivalent terms, and to foreignise when using semantically equivalent expressions. A recurring example of the former can be seen in two separate situations in which the player is offered words of encouragement from NPC's:

ST: 「うん！！ お仕事がんばってね」

RT: "Un!! Oshigoto ganbatte ne"

---

<sup>33</sup> Hasegawa, Yoko. *The Routledge course in Japanese translation*. Routledge, 2013, p. 176.

TT: "All right!! Good luck."

AT: "Ok! Do your best at work!"

ST: 「ま、しっかりやってくれ」

RT: "Ma, shikkari yatte kure"

TT: "Well, good luck"

AT: "Well, keep working hard"

The original lines involve a reference to trying hard or making an effort, whereas the American version translates both these terms as "good luck". "Good luck" is certainly functionally equivalent to "Ganbatte ne" as it is said in similar circumstances with the same intent, i.e. "I hope you do well". Still, the verb "ganbaru" (which "ganbatte" is a conjugation of) actually means "to work hard" and is used quite often in other situations in Japanese. There is an idea in the Japanese expression that success depends on the person's effort, whereas the English expression implies that chance is involved, and this cultural difference is lost here due to the use of a domesticating translation. The following example on the other hand shows a situation where semantic equivalence is used, even though a literal translation would have been entirely adequate in terms of meaning and fluency. Barret is angry with Cloud for being late to a rendezvous and scolds him accordingly:

ST: クラウド: 「約束の時間に遅れたようだ」

バレット: 「おい! 遅刻野郎!! ずいぶん派手なおでましじゃねえか」

RT: Cloud: "Yakusoku no jikan ni okureta yō da"

Barret: "Oi! Chikokuyarō!! Zuibun hadena odemashi janē ka"

TT: Cloud: "Looks like I'm a little late."

Barret: "You damn right, you're late!! Come waltzin' in here makin' a big scene."

AT: Cloud: "Looks like I'm late."

Barret: "Yeah you idiot, you're late!! And wasn't that entrance a bit over-the top?"

The official translation manages to capture the general tone here, i.e. how annoyed Barret is with Cloud, by having him use the idiom "Come waltzin' in here" rather than something more plain; a more literal translation, like the one I've given here, has too little emotion relative to the source text. While inserting an idiom might seem more typical of domestication, in this particular case it is implemented as a creative method of conveying Barret's overall tone in the conversation (not only the sentence it is translated from), and might in that sense just as easily be argued as an example of foreignisation.

At one point in the game, the player visits a restaurant, and is offered three options of what to eat, two of which are popular Japanese dishes and the third is unspecified:

ST: 「焼肉定食」 「さしみ定食」 「今日のおすすめ」

RT: Yakiniku teishoku/Sashimi teishoku/Honjitsu no osusume

TT: Korean B.B.Q./Sushi Plate/Today's Special

AT: Yakiniku course/Sashimi course/Today's special

My translation simply deals with both yakiniku and sashimi as loan words, thereby bypassing any difficulty they might present in translation. The decision to change sashimi to sushi in the American version is arguably valid, as sushi is a much more well-known concept than the similar dish sashimi, and a translation along the lines of "Raw fish course" would sound needlessly strange. The translation of yakiniku on the other hand, is much more problematic. Yakiniku is indeed a kind of Japanese take on Korean-style barbecued meat, and an explanatory translation like this may well have seemed more reasonable at the time of the game's release, given that the term yakiniku was perhaps less well-known back then. Nevertheless, referencing an actual country in any way in a game taking place in an alternate universe is completely unacceptable, as it greatly reduces the credibility of the in-game setting, and puts the translator's understanding of video games (or the concept of fantasy settings in general) into question. As this is an isolated mistake, the latter of these concerns can be dismissed, but it still highlights an issue addressed by Mangiron: how crucial it is for video game translators to have a certain level of previous knowledge about the field itself. To illustrate this (and also the issue of translating pieces of text outside their respective context), she mentions an especially regrettable example from the Spanish localisation of *Final Fantasy VII*, where the word "party", referring to the player-controlled group of characters, has been

translated as "fiesta", meaning "party" in the sense of social gathering<sup>34</sup>. The importance of background knowledge in this sense extends beyond translation of video games, as the same concept naturally applies to fantasy novels and science fiction movies as well. For example, a study of the original Chinese translation of *The Lord of the Rings* found that the word "orcs", describing a race of beast-like humanoid creatures, had been translated as 奥克斯, a simple phonetic transliteration, instead of the more appropriate 半獸人, meaning roughly "beast-man". A better understanding of Western fantasy lore would in this case have helped the original translator make the term more sense-making to Chinese readers.<sup>35</sup>

## 8.4 Humour

Translating jokes, puns or other humorous situations is inherently problematic because, as Mandiberg puts it, when a joke exists in the source language and not in the target language, the only options are to implement formal equivalence, i.e. translate the joke as it is, even if it lacks comedic value, or to translate the sense of it, i.e. substitute the original joke with one that is funny in the target language. Opting for the latter is very much in line with the goals of video game localisation, and does not present a significant issue; Mandiberg, however, takes issue with the concept of localisation itself, and as such, identifies humour as a particularly difficult problem to overcome.<sup>36</sup>

*Final Fantasy VII* is a somewhat dark game, but with a myriad of light-hearted elements. There is plenty of humour to be found, but mostly in the form of awkward or absurd situations rather than witty one-liners. As a result, comedic elements have stayed largely intact in the translation from the original version. In fact, if anything, the American version sometimes takes some liberty in being more colourful than the original, as the examples in this section will indicate. In this first example, the player-controlled party is insulted by the boss of the villain corporation Shinra, at which point Barret retorts in animated fashion:

ST: プレジデント神羅: 「そうだな。キミたちウジ虫を始末するには高価すぎる  
花火ではあるが……」

---

<sup>34</sup> Hevian, Carmen Mangiro. "Video games localisation: Posing new challenges to the translator." *Perspectives* 14.4 (2007): 306-323.

<sup>35</sup> Li, Hong-man. "Fantasy in Translation: A Study of Two Chinese Versions of *The Lord of the Rings*." *Cross-Cultural Communication* 6.4 (2011): 20-27.

<sup>36</sup> Mandiberg, Stephen. "Translation (is) not localization: Language in gaming." University of California, San Diego, 2009.

バレット: 「ウジ虫だと!? 言うに事欠いて、ウジ虫だと! キサマら神羅は、この星を死に追いやろうとする寄生虫じゃねェか! その親玉であるキサマが何をえらそうにホザク!」

RT: President Shinra: "Sō da na. Kimitachi ujimushi o shimatsusuru ni wa kōkasugiru hanabi de wa aru ga..."

Barret: "Ujimushi da to!? Iu ni kotokaite, ujimushi da to!" "Kisamara Shinra wa, kono hoshi o shi ni oiyarō to suru kiseichū janē ka! Sono oyadama de aru kisama ga nani o erasōni hozaku!"

TT: President Shinra: "And such a waste of good fireworks, just to get rid of vermin like you..."

Barret: "VERMIN? That's all you can say... VERMIN!" "Y'all Shinra're the VERMIN, killing the planet! And that makes you King VERMIN! So shu'up jackass!"

AT: President Shinra: "I suppose. These fireworks are too expensive just to deal with you worms, but..."

Barret: "WORMS, you said!? Of all things, calling us WORMS! You Shinra bastards, parasites sucking the life out of this planet! Why are you, the boss of those bastards, spouting off all high and mighty?!

A more literal translation would have the line as "parasites bringing about the death of this planet", but I adjusted it because the original delivery calls for a more snappy line. The original dialogue certainly plays with the imagery of bottom feeders, and has Barret questioning why the leader of, as he puts it, parasites, should be acting superior. The translated version makes this whole exchange and Barret's metaphor more cohesive, by inserting the general word "vermin" instead of maintaining the original distinction between "worm" and "parasite". This makes Barret's comment wittier and more colourful, but also blurs out the differing perspectives of the characters involved; President Shinra uses the word "ujimushi" (meaning worm) to highlight how insignificant he finds the player-controlled party, whereas Barret calls Shinra "kiseichū" (meaning parasite) because of how they drain energy from the planet. It is a clear example of domestication, as improved flow has taken precedence over translating the exact meaning. Overall though, nothing essential is lost and the small liberty taken by the translators here could perhaps be considered acceptable. In this next example, however, the localisation team's decision is much more questionable:



ST: バレット: 「ああ…… オレはもうダメだ……」 「マリン、父ちゃんはもう一度お前に会いたかった……」

ティファ: 「ちょっと！ エンギでもないこと言わないの！」

RT: Barret: "Aa... .. Ore wa mō dame da... .." "Marin, tō-chan wa mō ichido omae ni aitakatta... .."

Tifa: "Chotto! Engi demo nai koto iwanai no!"

TT: Barret: "huff... Man, I'm beat..." "Marlene, Daddy wanted to see your face one more time..."

Tifa: "Would you stop acting like a retard and climb?"

AT: Barret: "Oh... I can't... go on..." "Marlene, Daddy wanted to see you one more time..."

Tifa: "Hey! Don't say ominous things like that!"

Tifa's line from the official translation is undoubtedly more colourful than the one my more literal translation provides, but might also be considered offensive. Of course, some games deliberately include foul language in order to set a certain tone, but judging from the original phrasing and the general atmosphere of *Final Fantasy VII*, this was not intended here. Even though the translation accurately conveys Tifa's exasperation and is not strictly speaking unnatural in the context it appears, this is still a case where too much liberty has been taken with the source material.

Finally, here is more of a borderline case; the tone in this specific situation has been changed, but one could argue that it is consistent with how the character is presented overall. Aeris is one of Cloud's two love interests (Tifa being the other), and she and Cloud have a rather flirtatious interaction almost from the moment they meet, with Aeris displaying quite a bit of confidence, not content to come off as a mere damsel in distress. In this situation, Cloud is asking Aeris whether she is going to manage getting home on her own, to which she responds:

ST: 「いや～ん、帰れない～！！ って言ったらどうするの？」

RT: "Iyaan, kaerenai!! tte ittara dō suru no?"

TT: "Oh no! 'Whatever will I do!?' ...isn't that what you want me to say?"

AT: "What would you do if I were to say 'Nooo! I caaaaan't!'"

The original remark makes it sound like Aeris is questioning whether Cloud even cares what her answer is, as if he would just prefer to get rid of her. The translated version instead has her implying that he would like her to be dependent on him, for him to be her knight in shining armour. Broadly speaking, both versions achieve similar effects in the sense that they both portray Aeris as confrontational in this interaction. However, the tone is markedly different, with Aeris coming across as much more feisty, even teasing in the American version. This alteration makes Aeris seem less dependent on Cloud, thus downplaying their respective stereotypical gender roles. This could possibly be a conscious adjustment for the target culture, but it might just as easily be that the localisation team simply thought that Aeris' remark would sound more fun with a little sarcastic twist to it. The line is not out of character for the overall portrayal of Aeris throughout the game, but it does make her give a different impression in this particular situation. As an isolated example this does not pose much of a problem, but cases like this, where the depiction of a central character is somehow altered, are ultimately best to avoid.

## **8.5 Notable mistakes**

Preceding sections of this analysis have all dealt with examples that do not constitute clear-cut mistranslations, but might instead be best characterised as interesting, sometimes questionable choices stemming from the inherent difficulties of translating certain unique traits of the source language. If cases such as these had been the only instances of sub-optimal translation present in *Final Fantasy VII*, the negative feedback from fans concerning the American localisation of the game would have seemed unreasonably harsh. The fact is that the game's script does include a number of unequivocal mistakes, and this section will deal with selected examples of these, many of which underscore issues related to the video game localisation process itself.

As mentioned in chapter 7.4, the American version of *Final Fantasy VII* was not handled by a cohesive localisation team. A single American translator, with some aid from Japanese speakers – whose contributions he himself had to edit – coordinated the localisation process. Being in that sense a kind of patchwork, it is hardly a surprise that the script contains some glaring inconsistencies, both in terms of overall quality and in the way the same phrase may sometimes be translated two different ways, even when occurring in identical situations. For

example, there is a noticeable drop in quality throughout an early section of the game in which Cloud is walking around the slums of Midgar with Aeris, where unnatural and grammatically incorrect lines become highly frequent, the most (in)famous one being a remark made by Aeris regarding an NPC, "This guy are sick.". The following dialogue is perhaps the most interesting example from this part of the game, as it shows the possible consequences of having to translate something removed from its context. It is considerably longer than previous excerpts from the game script, because providing the full context is necessary to explain the errors it includes. In this situation, Cloud is just waking up from a hard fall. First, he is talking to a mysterious voice (here referred to as X) in his head, and eventually, he is greeted by Aeris :

ST: 謎の声: 「……大丈夫か? ……聞こえるか?」

クラウド: 「……………ああ」

謎の声: 「あの時は…… ヒザすりむいただけですんだけど……」

クラウド: 「……あの時?」

謎の声: 「今度はどうかな? 起きられるか?」

クラウド: 「……あの時? ……今度は?」

謎の声: 「……気にするな。今は身体のことだけ考えるんだ ……身体、動かせるか?」

クラウド: 「……やってみる」

エアリス: 「あっ! 動いた!」

RT: X: ... .. Daijōbu ka? 'Kikoeru ka?

Cloud: "... .. Aa"

X: Ano toki wa... .. hiza surimuita dake de sunda kedo... ..

Cloud: "... .. Ano toki?"

X: Kondo wa dō kana? Okirareru ka?

Cloud: "... .. Ano toki? ... .. Kondo wa?"

X: ... .. Ki ni suru na. Ima wa karada no koto dake kangaeru n da ... .. Karada, ugokaseru ka?

Cloud: "... .. Yatte miru"

Aeris: "Aa! Ugoita!"

TT: X: ...You all right? ...Can you hear me?

Cloud: ".....Yeah....."

X: Back then... You could get by with just skinned knees.....

Cloud: "What do you mean by 'back then'?"

X: What about now? Can you get up?

Cloud: "What do you mean by 'that time'? .....What about now?"

X: Don't worry about me. You just worry about yourself now.

Cloud: ".....I'll give it a try."

Aeris: "Oh! It moved!"

AT: X: ...Are you all right? Can you hear me?

Cloud: "...Yeah..."

X: That time... You could get by with just a few scrapes and bruises...

Cloud: "...That time?"

X: What about this time? Can you get up?

Cloud: "...That time? ...This time?"

X: ...Don't worry about that. Just think about your body now. ...Can you move your body?"

Cloud: "...I'll give it a try."

Aeris: "Oh! You're moving!"

Before addressing the two central points of interest, it should be noted that the translation "You could get by with just skinned knees" from the American version is actually more literally accurate than my take on it, but sounds significantly less natural, therefore my version provides a possible alternative instead. The major problem in this dialogue is the inconsistency in Cloud's replies to the voice in his head. In the Japanese version, Cloud twice asks the voice what it is referring to when mentioning "ano toki", which means "that time" or "back then" in English. While either way of translating it is fine, this particular context calls for repetition of the same phrase twice, as Cloud is quoting what the voice said. Therefore, the fact that Cloud first says "What do you mean by 'back then'?" and then immediately after says "What do you mean by 'that time'?" makes no sense. The most reasonable explanation for this is that the two lines were handled at separate times or by separate people, but it could of course just be an oversight or a lack of regard for the context of the line. The other interesting point here is Aeris' line at the end, which ignores the context of the scene entirely as she exclaims "Oh! It moved!", referring to Cloud. In Japanese, the subject of a sentence is often not explicit and must be derived from the context. This is one such case, as Aeris does not specify what or who it is that moved in the original version, but from the context of the scene, it is still abundantly clear. As no one else is around, "Oh! You're moving!" or "Oh! You moved!" would probably have been the most natural, but "Oh! He moved!" would also have been acceptable. The official translation, though, certainly makes it seem like the line was translated out of context.

A similar example occurs at a stage in the game where the player is given a choice of two different routes to reach the 59th floor of a skyscraper, one being through the front door, using the elevator to get up, or sneaking in through the back door by walking up the stairs. This results in different dialogues occurring depending on the route chosen. In the original version, there is an exchange between Cloud and Barret that is exactly the same regardless of which way the player went, but in the American version, this has resulted in two different dialogues:

ST: バレット: 「……へへへ」

クラウド: 「なんだよ、気持ち悪いな」

バレット: 「あんたでも他人のために戦うことがあるんだな。見直したぜ」

クラウド: 「あんたに見直されてもうれしくない」

バレット: 「いや、なんていうか……いろいろ悪かったな」

RT: Barret: "...hehehe"

Cloud: "Nan da yo, kimochiwarui na"

Barret: "Anta demo tanin no tame ni tatakau koto ga aru n da na. Minaoshita ze"

Cloud: "Anta ni minaosaretemo ureshikunai"

Barret: "Iya, nante iuka... iroiro warukatta na"

TT (1): Barret: "...heh heh heh."

Cloud: "Knock it off. You're giving me the creeps."

Barret: "So even you will fight for someone else. I had you figured wrong I guess."

Cloud: "Who cares what you figured!"

Barret: "I'm just sayin' mebbe I was wrong..."

TT (2): Barret: "Heh, heh, heh."

Cloud: "What is it? You're givin' me the willies."

Barret: "So there are times when even you fight for other people. I am impressed."

Cloud: "Who cares if you're impressed...?"

Barret: "Y'know, I ain't so good at sayin' this but... Sorry...for lotsa things."

AT: Barret: "...heh heh heh."

Cloud: "C'mon, what is it? You're giving me the creeps."

Barret: "So even you would fight for other people. I was wrong about you."

Cloud: "Hearing that from you doesn't really make me happy."

Barret: "No it's just, how do I say this... I'm sorry... for a lot of things."

In terms of how users experience the game, this is a rather minor detail; the same basic message comes across in both variations of this interaction, and additionally, most people are likely to only play through the game once, never even noticing this difference. That being said, it is noteworthy that every single line of this exchange has been translated differently for these two scenes, even with the source text being identical for both. Furthermore, one translation presents Cloud as rather annoyed and even angry, while Barret gives him rather tentative praise, whereas the other portrays Cloud as cooler, even indifferent, with Barret giving him

somewhat stronger praise. This is a misrepresentation of the original version, but as said, ultimately a minor one. This example does, however, serve to highlight the statement made by Honeywood regarding the lack of proper review or editing process in the making of *Final Fantasy VII*, which might have helped eliminate mistakes such as these.

As stated previously, working with the kind of specialised field that fantasy or sci-fi settings present, requires extensive background knowledge. Many terms or even entire lines would make no sense in a more realistic setting, and without understanding the context properly, translators might seek to adjust such sentences to make them more comprehensible. In doing so, they run the risk of mistaking the meaning entirely; a rather simple example of this would be the word "blink" in a fantasy setting as opposed to a realistic setting. The normal sense of the word is to close one or both of one's eyes rapidly, but in a fantasy setting, it may instead refer to teleporting, i.e. moving instantaneously from one location to another. This problem is what causes the following example to be one of the most regrettable mistranslations in the game:

ST: セフィロス:「この星はもともとセトラのものだった。セトラは旅をする  
民族。旅をして、星を開き、そしてまた旅……」

RT: Sephiroth: "Kono hoshi wa motomoto Setora no mono datta. Setora wa tabi o suru minzoku. Tabi o shite, hoshi o hiraki, soshite mata tabi... .."

TT: Sephiroth : "This Planet originally belonged to the Cetra. Cetra was a (sic) itinerant race. They would migrate in, settle the Planet, then move on..."

AT: Sephiroth: This Planet originally belonged to the Cetra. The Cetra were a travelling people. They would set out on a journey, unlock the Planet, then begin another journey..."

The original line is very confusing without any complementary information. Some of this stems from how the in-game world is referred to simply as *hoshi* in the original Japanese, as this can refer both to "the Planet", i.e. the in-game universe, or just any given planet(s). The real problem here though, is the term "Hoshi o hiraki", here translated by me as "They would unlock the planet". Removed from the context of the game this line makes no sense, but this is a concept mentioned several times throughout the plot, that the Cetra can communicate with the planet and thereby "open" it, a vague term seemingly referring to giving life to nature and making the planet thrive. At an earlier point in the game, the American version actually

translates this as "unlock the planet", thereby establishing it as an in-game term. The intended meaning of the original version is to describe the Cetra as a kind of nomadic tribe, with close ties to nature and the planet itself. In this example, however, they could just as easily be interpreted as a space-faring race, colonising planets before moving on to the next one. This is a case where the translator's artistic license goes too far; even though the original line is quite vague, the attempt to make it more sense-making needlessly creates ambiguity regarding a significant plot point, something which Venuti, Vermeer, and common localisation practice would all be against.

## 9. Summary and conclusion

One notion that was dismissed rather quickly while examining *Final Fantasy VII* was the idea that whatever was true of a single game might in some sense be universally applicable in terms of video game localisation. This is not to say that the opposite turned out to be the case either; on the contrary, many issues and difficulties encountered in translating *Final Fantasy VII* may very well apply in other cases as well. What cannot be denied, however, is firstly that *Final Fantasy VII* is a quite old game, which was not subject to the kind of editing process that is customary for modern games, and secondly – and most importantly – that it is a Japanese game, which linguistically creates certain unique sets of problems. The most obvious and recurring translation issues in *Final Fantasy VII* are inextricably linked to the Japanese writing system, although surprisingly less to its use of Chinese characters (*kanji*) and more to its method of transliterating Western pronunciation through the use of *katakana*. Translating proper nouns written in *kanji* can be very challenging, as they may sometimes hold meaning impossible to express in a comparable amount of space using the Roman alphabet. Shinra (神羅) is one such example, where the translated version inevitably loses some additional meaning present in the source text. Translation errors related to *katakana*, like mistaking Aerith for Aeris, Rebirth Sephiroth for Reverse Sephiroth (ending up as Bizarro Sephiroth) are interesting in that they more or less amount to a kind of failed back translation. Another boss character in the game with a mistranslated name illustrates this well: The Japanese game designers wanted to name him Heretic Hōjō, which meant that the name became *heretikku hōjō* in Japanese, which the localisation team then translated as Helletic Hojo. Avoiding situations such as these should be quite easy, especially if using an in-house



translation model, as these examples are not so much mistranslations as misinterpretations; simple feedback from the development team would very likely have cleared up all instances of this issue.

The concept of gendered speech is certainly not limited to Japanese, but it is fair to say that it is more easily identifiable in a script than it would be in e.g. English. The Japanese language can convey gender with simple pronouns and particles; in English, a more complete, full-fledged speech pattern is necessary to paint such a picture. *Final Fantasy VII* notably goes to great lengths to establish such a speech pattern for one of its male characters, but elects not to do so for almost anyone else, even in situations where the original game makes it a point of emphasis, e.g. when a transvestite male uses female speech. Given that Barret is the only character to be given a truly distinctive manner of speech, it could be argued that indicators of male/female language were largely ignored in the translation process, and that the localisation team merely wished to reflect how "non-standard" the original Barret sounded compared to the other party members. Barret is also the most frequent source of comic relief in the game, often yelling and reacting in an over-the-top manner, which may have further motivated the translators to make sure he did not sound bland. That these aspects were seemingly ignored is not to say that all characters sound entirely gender-neutral; for example, Cloud does still sound somewhat masculine and Tifa slightly more feminine. Even so, there are many clear-cut examples where the character's tone has been completely overlooked, like when Tifa is late for her date with Cloud, and delivers an apology with all the emotion of an android, even though the original has her almost singing it.

Translating jokes and humorous situations is one of the most difficult things to do faithfully, because doing so often squanders some or all of their comedic value, doing a disservice to both the target readers and ultimately the source text itself; a joke is less a transfer of information than it is a means of eliciting amusement, so one might even argue that a functional translation is more faithful than a semantic one would be. Hence, translators should be afforded some leeway in dealing with these situations. *Final Fantasy VII* mostly handles this just fine, sometimes opting for slight variations, giving the translated version a bit more snap to it, as in Barret's tirade about "vermin". Another example of this is when Aeris is asked by Cloud if she can manage getting home on her own, in the original version, her response is confrontational but ultimately tentative, while the American version has her giving a more sarcastic, even cheeky answer. Sometimes, though, the localisation team stretches its creative liberty too far, like when Tifa casually tells Barret to "stop acting like a retard". Interestingly,

the reason that particular line is unacceptable is not that it misrepresents the exact original meaning; given the rather skopos-oriented mandate of video game localisation, this in itself is fine, the issue lies in it being offensive, which might affect the game's target demographic. This is one example highlighting the treatment of video games as entertainment first, art a distant second.

Naming all the unique features of video game localisation relative to other forms of translation would naturally be impossible based solely on the findings of this study. That being said, two things stood out throughout my analysis: the need for specialised knowledge and the impact of the translation process itself. *Final Fantasy VII* is an RPG that takes place in a fantasy setting, from this information alone, there are a multitude of in-game rules and genre conventions that a would-be translator should be aware of. The player-controlled group of characters is called a party, this party fights to gain experience points (EXP), if they are damaged they lose health points (HP), this can be restored by drinking potions, etc. Not being aware of these things result in embarrassing mistranslations like the Spanish version's *fiesta* to describe the player party, or the ludicrous insertion of the dish "Korean B.B.Q." on a menu found in an alternate universe with no relation whatsoever to our own. As for the translation process, the fragmentary nature of it – at least when using an outsourcing model – creates many problems, mainly as a result of lines sometimes being translated out of context, or by different people. This point is something I stumbled on somewhat accidentally when analysing the game's most serious mistranslations; the original point of examining them was to determine whether the overall quality of the translated version was acceptable or if fan backlash to it was in fact warranted.

Video game localisation is, by its very nature, a form of translation with the target culture firmly in mind. In that sense, it is hardly a surprise that, even though the translated version of *Final Fantasy VII* sometimes fails in reproducing nuances of the original game, it generally manages to create a comparable experience from a skopos theory perspective. That being said, this in itself is arguably a somewhat trivial accomplishment; the main purpose of a video game is after all to entertain, through gameplay and interesting story-telling, and simply acknowledging that it achieves this goal, ultimately says nothing of the worth of neither this isolated translation nor video game translation in general. In light of that, it bears mentioning, especially to readers unfamiliar with games, that enjoyment of an RPG such as *Final Fantasy VII* hinges enormously on the player fully grasping the language it is played in. The dialogue alone in the game numbers around 100,000 words, to say nothing of various ability names,

descriptions, etc also necessary to play the game as intended. Accounting for this aspect as well, the American version of *Final Fantasy VII* is, some questionable decisions and a few egregious errors aside, a perfectly adequate, if flawed, localisation of the original.

When examining and comparing the Japanese and American versions more closely, looking at specific examples, applying Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication tends to be much more fruitful and interesting. A few cases certainly highlight what might be viewed as skopos-oriented thinking on the part of the translators, notably the decision to censor the translation of *manji shuriken* (to "spiral shuriken" instead of the literal "swastika shuriken"), and choosing to make Barret sound like a very stereotypical African-American man. However, looking at foreignisation/domestication, what is especially interesting is that several examples of both can be found throughout the script, with seemingly no clear directive regarding which is preferable. This is surprising; one would expect domestication to be the clear method of choice given the emphasis on catering to the target culture, but this is an area which *Final Fantasy VII* manages to balance very well, especially with regard to the character of Barret. By implementing a somewhat foreignising approach in translating Barret's speech manner, substituting the original version's rough male speech for stereotypical African-American Vernacular English, both recognisable and distinctive to the target culture, the American version simultaneously achieves both the typical goal of domestication, namely giving the target text a natural flow, and that of foreignisation, i.e. that of reproducing unique elements of the source language. The relative freedom involved in video game localisation leaves room for, and in some cases even demands great creativity of translators<sup>37</sup>. This means that employing a certain measure of foreignisation is not only viable but even necessary in some cases in order to do the original work justice, and Barret, controversial as the character may be, is a good example of this.

The limited scope of this study precludes it from providing more than a rough outline of some issues encountered when translating video games. Nevertheless, even just scratching the surface of this field of translation shows that it contains a wealth of material worthy of closer examination. As mentioned earlier, video game localisation is a relatively new and unexplored area of translation studies, and one can only hope that this does not remain the case for long. Its growing popularity and acceptance as an art form, coupled with its unique

---

<sup>37</sup> Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 6 (2006): 10-21

features in terms of interactivity, translation process and extensive use of specialised terms, should make it an interesting subject for future translation studies, an idea I hope that, if nothing else, this analysis of *Final Fantasy VII* might lend some credence to.

## 10. Bibliography

### Printed sources

Bailey, Guy, et al., eds. *African-American English: structure, history and use*. Routledge, 1998.

Famitsu, ed. *Final Fantasy VII Kaitai Shinsho*. Famitsu, 1997.

Green, Lisa J. *African American English: a linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Gustafsson, Johan. "Puns in Japanese advertisements." Lund University, BA thesis, 2010.

Hasegawa, Yoko. *The Routledge course in Japanese translation*. Routledge, 2013.

Hevian, Carmen Mangiro. "Video games localisation: Posing new challenges to the translator." *Perspectives* 14.4 (2007): 306-323.

Hiramoto, Mie. "Anime and intertextualities Hegemonic identities in Cowboy Bebop." *Pragmatics and Society* 1.2 (2010): 234-256.

Inoue, Miyako. "Speech without a speaking body: 'Japanese women's language' in translation." *Language & Communication* 23.3 (2003): 315-330.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmarch. *Language and woman's place*. Vol. 56. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Li, Hong-man. "Fantasy in Translation: A Study of Two Chinese Versions of The Lord of the Rings." *Cross-Cultural Communication* 6.4 (2011): 20-27.

Mandiberg, Stephen. "Translation (is) not localization: Language in gaming." University of California, San Diego, 2009.

Mangiron, Carmen, and Minako O'Hagan. "Game Localisation: unleashing imagination with 'restricted' translation." *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 6 (2006): 10-21.

O'Hagan, Minako, and Carmen Mangiron. *Game Localization: Translating for the global digital entertainment industry*. Vol. 106. John Benjamins Publishing, 2013.

Schäffner, Christina. "Skopos theory." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London & New York: Routledge (1998): 235-38.

Venuti, Lawrence. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge, 2008.

### Internet sources

Buchanan, Levi. 2009. "A History of Insensitivity". *Ign.com*. March 6.

<http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/03/06/a-history-of-insensitivity> (Accessed 2013-11-05).

D'Angelo, William. 2013. "Top 10 in Sales - Final Fantasy". *Vgchartz.com*. April 29.

<http://www.vgchartz.com/article/250920/top-10-in-sales-final-fantasy/> (Accessed 2013-11-23).

Edge Staff. 2009. "Why are Black Game Characters Failing the Audience?". *Edge-online.com*.

February 8. <http://www.edge-online.com/features/why-are-black-game-characters-failing-audience/2/> (Accessed 2013-11-05).

Fear, Ed. 2007. "Sakaguchi discusses the development of Final Fantasy". *Develop-online.net*.

December 13. <http://www.develop-online.net/news/sakaguchi-discusses-the-development-of-final-fantasy/0102088> (Accessed 2013-11-23).

Fenlon, Wesley. 2011. "The Rise of Squaresoft Localization". *Iup.com*. April 28.

<http://www.1up.com/features/squaresoft-localization> (Accessed 2013-12-01).

IGN Staff. 2006. "Top 10 Tuesday: Best Sidekicks". *Ign.com*. March 28.

<http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/03/29/top-10-tuesday-best-sidekicks> (Accessed 2013-11-04).

Kishida, Maya (June 14, 2010). "Entāteinmento – Horii Yuji Intābyū". *Web.archive.org* (article originally posted at *Plaza.bunka.go.jp*). June 14.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20100614061622/http://plaza.bunka.go.jp/museum/meister/entertainment/vol2> (Accessed 2014-01-05).

Kohler, Chris. 2009. "Why's It Called 'Final Fantasy'? Uematsu Explains". *Wired.com*. July 23.

<http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2009/07/final-fantasy/> (Accessed 2013-11-23).

Kotowaza gakushūshitsu. "Shinra Banshō".

[http://kotowaza.avaloky.com/pv\\_yoj206.html](http://kotowaza.avaloky.com/pv_yoj206.html) (Accessed 2013-10-14).

Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2011. "Financial Results Briefing for Fiscal Year Ended March 2011".

*Nintendo.co.jp*. April 26. <http://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2011/110426e.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2014-01-05).

Otero, Jose. 2012. "Cover Story: Final Fantasy VII's Quinceañera". *Iup.com*. September 4.

<http://www.1up.com/features/final-fantasy-vii-quinceanera> (Accessed 2013-11-23).

Parish, Jeremy. 2009. "XIII Things about Final Fantasy XIII, Part VI". *1up.com*. April 22. <http://www.1up.com/do/blogEntry?bId=8986639&publicUserId=5379721> (Accessed 2013-11-04).

Rose, Mike. 2011. "*Final Fantasy* Series Hits 100M Units Shipped". *Webcitation.org*. June 7. <http://www.webcitation.org/60eGChfx6> (Accessed 2013-11-23).

Square Enix. 2010. "Results Briefing Session The Fiscal Year Ended 31 March 2010". *Hd.square-enix.com*. May 18. [http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/pdf/news/20100518\\_02.pdf](http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/pdf/news/20100518_02.pdf) (Accessed 2014-01-05).

Japanese and English scripts of *Final Fantasy VII*, accessible through these sites:

<http://ajatt.com/finalfantasy/ff7p-index.htm> (Last accessed 2014-02-02).

<http://www.rpgamer.com/games/ff/ff7/text/info/ff7disc1.txt> (Last accessed 2014-02-02).

<http://www.rpgamer.com/games/ff/ff7/text/info/ff7disc2.txt> (Last accessed 2014-02-02)