

AMATEUR TRANSLATION AGENCY IN ACTION: A CASE STUDY OF SCANLATION

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the phenomenon of scanlation, which in practice sees non-professional translators involved in the unauthorised translation and online distribution of graphic narratives. The case study presented here focuses on the amateur translation of Japanese visual narratives (known as manga) into English. The aim of this paper is to shed light specifically on translational aspects of scanlation into English: what motivates the selection of a particular text or genres for translation? What problems emerge during the process of translation? How are these problems solved?

KEYWORDS: Manga Scanlation, Japanese Visual Culture, Translation Agency, Fan Translation

Amateur translation practices have gained a degree of attention in recent years in translation studies. Motivated by an interest in transcultural cultural products (Chin and Morimoto, 2013) and helped by new digital technologies, fans increasingly engage in participatory cultural practices online (Jenkins, 2006). In recent years, a number of amateur translation practices have emerged as part of this participatory culture. The contemporary field of non-professional translation is in fact so broad that, according to Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva (2012), it is professional translation that should be taken as the exception nowadays, rather than the norm:

The terms used to address the phenomenon of non-professionals translating and interpreting (e.g. scanlation, romhacking, language brokering, etc.) are now highly varied and serve as a powerful reminder of the fact that non-professional translation and interpreting are as widely established and diversified, if not more so, than professional translation and interpreting (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva, 2012, p. 157).

This article focuses on the phenomenon of scanlation, which in practice sees non-professional translators involved in the unauthorised translation and online distribution of graphic narratives. The aim of this paper is to shed light specifically on translational aspects of scanlation: what motivates the selection of a particular text or genre for translation? What problems emerge during the process of translation? How are these problems solved? The academic literature on scanlation has already received a number of important contributions, but while these studies have tended to focus on the broader structure of voluntary participation in scanlation activities (Fabbretti, 2014, 2017) and the significance of these activities for professional cultural mediators (Lee, 2009, 2012), relatively less attention has been paid to the specific role that amateur translators play in this broader process of informal cultural transfer.

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The case study presented here focuses on the amateur translation of Japanese visual narratives (known as manga) into English. This study is not meant to illustrate Japanese manga scanlation as a whole, but rather aims to present a qualitatively rich description of the actions taken by an individual translator. In other words, my intention here is to supplement the already rich literature on scanlation, which has dealt with the broader normative aspects of the practice, with insights into the agencies responsible for the translation of these texts. This naturally leads to a consideration of the concept of translation agency, understood here as a willingness and ability to act that is not only individual (Kinnunen and Koskinen, 2010, pp. 6-7) but also relational, in the sense that it is “exercised in a social world in which structure shapes the opportunities and resources available to individuals, in which appropriate ways of being and behaving are not simply a matter of individual choice” (Cleaver, 2007, p. 226).

In order to operationalise the study of amateur translators’ agency in relation to the broader structure of scanlation, the present article includes insights developed by Albert Bandura (2001) in the field of social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory considers individuals as agents of change, able to engage proactively, self-regulate and self-reflect. Accordingly, Bandura defined four core properties of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001, pp. 6-10). These properties can be used to describe the phases of a dynamic behaviour designed to accomplish a goal. Bandura (2001, p. 6) defines intentionality as a “proactive commitment” on the part of an agent to bring about future actions. In the present context, intentionality is used to refer to the proactive commitment on the part of amateur translators to translate a particular manga work or genre. Bandura (2001, p. 7) defines forethought as the ability to “anticipate the likely consequences of prospective actions, and select and create courses of action likely to produce desired outcomes and avoid detrimental ones”. Here, forethought is used in relation to the translation goals set by a translator, in particular regarding the kind of text that should be created as a result of translation.

Bandura (2001, p. 8) defines self-reactiveness as the deliberate ability of an agent to direct action through “self-monitoring, performance self-guidance via personal standards, and corrective self-reactions”. In the present context, if intentionality and forethought are seen to anticipate the act of translation, then self-reactiveness can be said to take place during the process of translation, manifested for example in the shape of paratextual elements inserted by the translator in the text, presenting observations directly related to the process of translation, such as translation notes and commentaries that explicitly address translation problems and solutions, personal goals and standards, and other instances of self-regulation that may have taken place during the act of translation. Finally, Bandura (2001, p. 10) defines self-reflectiveness as “the metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one’s thoughts and actions”. Here, self-reflection is understood as the process of self-evaluation that may occur after the act of translation, as for example when a translator subjectively judges the outcome of translation against the set goals and standards or even against feedback from peers and readers.

Before moving on to a detailed discussion of the present case study, I would like to draw a rough sketch of the social world in which scanlation activities take place: the field of manga scanlation. First of all, what are manga? I define manga as a particular type of visual narrative originally serialised in Japan in the format of monthly or weekly anthologies known as manga magazines. These magazines tend to target narrowly defined age and gender audience demographics (Ingulsrud and Allen, 2009, p. 3) and are characterised by their affordability and availability in Japan. These characteristics lend the medium a broader scope for experimentations (Ito, 2010, p. 29), which also means that many manga series published in Japan are not licensed for commercial distribution abroad.

Historically, scanlation has played a role in filling the gaps in the repertoire of manga available in English created by commercial selection criteria (Lee, 2009, p. 7), but the field of scanlation itself is not homogenous; broadly speaking, within the field of English language scanlation, it is possible to draw a distinction between larger, more visible groups carrying out the scanlation of more popular works, and smaller, less visible groups, scanlating less mainstream works. The process of scanlation involves a number of activities, ranging from editing to translating and proofreading, and demands a significant investment of time and effort, which means that groups with more members are able to carry out more projects and deliver them more quickly than smaller groups. As a result, smaller scanlation groups prefer to focus on works that somehow eschew the mainstream, such as older works, works by new unknown authors, works drawn in unconventional and experimental styles, or those that tackle potentially delicate subjects. Accordingly, the structure of the scanlation field means that the choice of a manga or genre to scanlate is defined by (and in turn helps define) the very identity and purpose of a scanlation group.

The case study presented here investigates the translation of a minor manga work: *Kodomo Wa Wakatte Agenai* (Lit. Children Wouldn't Understand), created by Tajma Rettou and translated into English by a scanlator that goes by the online alias "Vhirx". As the aim of this article is to present a qualitatively rich description of an individual amateur translator and his practices, there are two main reasons why this particular work was chosen. The first is the copious amount of translation notes inserted at the back of each chapter. While translation notes are a fairly common device in the field of scanlation (Fabbretti, 2016), the translation of *Kodomo* stands out for the breadth and depth of the notes provided. These notes facilitated the investigation into translation agency as they indicated that a significant amount of effort was put into the translation. The second reason is that Vhirx agreed to be interviewed and provided articulate and thoughtful responses to the questions posed. While emails with other scanlators were exchanged as well, for the purpose of presenting a case study that provides a detailed illustration of the thinking behind the choices that occurred before, during and after the translation, the exchanges with Vhirx were particularly productive. The quotations presented here are drawn from our email exchanges over a period of six months, as well as from information available on Vhirx's scanlation group's webpage, [Onesnowshoe.tumblr.com](https://www.onesnowshoe.tumblr.com).

As argued above, the choice of a particular manga text to translate acquires meaning within the specific context in which this choice is exercised; this calls for some background information on *Kodomo Wa Wakatte Agenai* and the meaningful opportunities it gave Vhix to exercise his translation agency. Created by Rettou in 2014, this manga was originally serialised in Japan in the Seinen manga magazine *Weekly Morning*, published by Kodansha. The work is composed of sixteen chapters, later collected in two volumes, which formed the basis for the scanned version. *Kodomo* is Rettou's first long-form manga, her previously published works being short narratives composed of single self-contained chapters, all published in Kodansha's *Morning*. None of Rettou's works have so far been translated into English, nor is there evidence of her works having been translated into any other languages.

The protagonists of *Kodomo* are two children (Shouhei Moji and Minami Sakuta) dealing with family issues. Shouhei is a serious young boy who teaches calligraphy at his family's school. Minami is a seemingly carefree girl and a swimming champion. The two meet at school one day and soon become close friends. Shortly thereafter, we find out that Minami wants to find her natural father, who disappeared years before, after becoming involved with a cult. The two decide to ask Shouhei's older sibling, Akihiko (Aki-chan), for help to find Minami's father. We are then introduced to Akihiko, who lives in a nearby town after being ousted from the family home as a result of having undergone a sex change operation in order to become a woman.

It should be clear that *Kodomo* is an unusual story: it blends different literary genres; it is partly a family drama and a coming-of-age story and also features elements of a detective story and a supernatural thriller. The manga is drawn in a deceptively simple style that eschews realistic depiction of characters and backgrounds in favour of softer, stylised representations. Published in a manga magazine for mature male readers, the manga deals with mature themes but also presents them in a gentle way, mostly avoiding a resolution of the characters' issues through violent means or excessive drama. The story, while intriguing, generally avoids the use of dynamic stylistic techniques characteristic of action-oriented manga and, in this sense, may appear rather sedate at first sight.

In short, *Kodomo* may be difficult to categorise within a single publishing category, and it presents complex characters dealing with mature themes in a composed, non-dramatic way. It is therefore possible to suggest that these qualities posit *Kodomo* at the periphery of the manga field and that the choice of translating such kind of manga illustrates well the kind of intentionality that underpins the actions of a translator who intends to promote awareness of interesting and less known manga works.¹

¹ For an example, refer to the credit page at: https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20-%20v1%20c1%20%5Bbatoto%5D#page/n27/mode/2up (Accessed: 18 December 2018).



Figure 1. *Kodomo wa Wakatte Agenai*, credit page.

In his emails, Vhix explained in aesthetic terms his commitment to bringing these female authors to the attention of readers outside of Japan: he deliberately chooses manga that “don’t look like anything else out there” in order to challenge established ideas about manga as an artistic medium (personal correspondence, 24 May 2016). Vhix selects projects that, first and foremost, appeal to his broader artistic preferences. These preferences are not limited to manga works, but span various media, from literature to Japanese cinema. What he likes about these works is the marriage of complex forms, “the sometimes nearly overwhelming detail” to “surprisingly simple, sentimental stories” (personal correspondence, 24 May 2016).

A significant factor of Vhix’s selection criteria is his belief that the manga medium is severely underrepresented in the English language, and his commitment to bringing about change: “the medium in Japan is so much more developed, capable of so much more... I want to flesh just a little bit of that out... I think exposure here has the potential to open space for that in people’s minds” (personal correspondence, 24 May 2016). In other words, if we take Vhix’s goal to be the renewal of manga’s English repertoire, then planning to translate works by severely underrepresented Japanese female authors can be understood as the evidence of Vhix’s intentionality, a proactive commitment to bringing about such renewal.

Planning to translate one or multiple texts, however, is easier said than done: it is common in translation to encounter elements of a text that “stand out from run-of-the-mill translation” (Pedersen, 2011, p. 41) and that require the conscious application of translation strategies. Problems may arise in the process of translation due to the lack of exact correspondence between two different languages and cultures. Solving these problems means that a translator must make choices, setting priorities for his or her translation (Tymockzo, 2014, p. 211).

The same setting of priorities also occurs in scanlation. In our correspondence, Vhirx explained that he generally has in mind a number of concerns when translating manga: he wants to be accurate, but also to translate “non-mechanically” so that the text reads as naturally as possible in English. Furthermore, he wants to translate manga accurately as works of art and, therefore, aims to understand the style in which they are written or, as he put it, “the flavour of a certain author’s voice”, in order to preserve some of that style or voice in the translated text (personal communication, 1 September 2016).

Vhirx is conscious that these goals may often conflict with each other, which in practice means that it is not always possible to achieve accuracy and naturalness in translation at the same time. Furthermore, Vhirx acknowledges that “any given work of art is a product of its own time and context” and that, regardless of his skills and efforts, the decontextualizing nature of translation means that “some context may need to be supplied to the reader to make sense of the totality of the work” (personal communication, 1 September 2016).

One way to understand this setting of translation priorities is through the concept of “forethought”, defined as the ability to adapt one’s behaviour in order to bring about an anticipated outcome (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). According to Bandura (2001, p. 7), this ability enables people to “transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to shape and regulate the present to fit a desired future”. In other words, people do not act only on behalf of anticipated external rewards and punishments, but rather “display considerable self-direction in the face of competing influence” (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). In the context of the present case study, how were the priorities set by Vhirx for his translations brought to bear on his translation practice?

In order to answer this question, it is useful to consider a translation problem that emerged in *Kodomo* around the different ways in which personal pronouns are used in Japanese and English. As we have seen, one of the main characters of the manga is Shouhei’s sibling Akihiko, who has undergone gender reassignment and is now living as a woman. Throughout the manga, Shouhei variously refers to Akihiko as お兄さん (Onii-san; lit: (honorific) elder brother, but also more generally used to refer to a non-aged male stranger) or お兄ちゃん (Oniichan; lit. (honorific) elder brother, used by children to refer to their elder brother) and 兄貴 (Aniki; lit. honourable term for an older brother or a superior). The reason why Shouhei refers to Akihiko in such a way is not fully explained in the manga, but one possible interpretation is that, although Shouhei loves Akihiko and the two siblings have a good relationship, as a child Shouhei may not be quite ready to let go of Akihiko’s role as a male figure of authority in his life. It must be noted, however, that at some point in the story Akihiko also refers to himself as the big brother in conversation with Shouhei. What is notable here is that, while Shouhei does refer to Akihiko as the “elder brother”, due to the way Japanese language is structured he is not forced to choose between the third person pronouns “he” and “she” when talking about Akihiko.

The Japanese language in fact allows for pronoun-dropping, as it allows for certain classes of words to be omitted in contexts where the identity of the pronoun can be pragmatically or grammatically inferred² (Wang et al, 2017, p. 66). Furthermore, in Japanese, a broader variety of options is available when choosing self-reference terms. These include “kin terms, proper names (both first and last), occupational titles, and other terms that could not be substituted for pronouns in most Indo-European languages (Suzuki, 1978, p. 93, cited in Kondo, 1990, p. 28). According to Kondo (1990, p. 27), in Japanese “the choice of one pronoun over another is situationally negotiated and varies according to gender, class, region, and so on”.³

In the context of the present case study, the ability of Japanese speakers to omit pronouns and express grammatical gender agreement implicitly is manifested in a number of instances. For example, in the passage below, taken from page 54 of volume 1,⁴ Shouhei is apologising to Sakuta, explaining that he did not expect Akihiko to have so little experience as a detective, and that he is sorry if his father will not be found:

Shouhei: 兄貴にあそこまで

Shouhei: 探偵の仕事が来てないとは思わなかったんだ

(Gloss translation: I did not expect the detective work of my elder brother to have only come so far)

Shouhei: 大丈夫とは思うけど もし見つかなかったらごめん

(Gloss translation: I think it will go well, but if [your father] is not found, I am sorry)

Translation by Vhix:

Shouhei: I didn't realize that my brother's career as a detective had only gotten that far.

Shouhei: I think it'll turn out ok. But if he can't find your father, I'm sorry.

And again, on page 102, volume 1:⁵

Sakuta: あと明さんが私にたのみみたいことあるんだって、何だろう

² Japanese pronouns are not strictly consistent with English pronouns, as a variety of first-person pronouns – such as *watakushi*, *watashi*, *wasshi*, *boku*, *ore* (male), *watakushi*, *watashi*, *atashi* (female) – can all be translated into the English pronoun “I”.

³ Underpinning the multiple ways in which Japanese people present themselves in particular situations is the idea that the Japanese “I” is “shaped by formality, kinship, occupation, other people's desires and usages, and myriad other ‘contextual’ factors” (Kondo, 1990, p. 29). This Japanese idea of relationally defined selves is in striking contrast to the way in which the English “I” remains constant, regardless of context: “the use of personal referents is one of the most difficult features of the language to teach Americans, for whom the apparently irreducible ‘I’ presents a major stumbling block to the easy adoption of the constantly shifting, relational ‘I’ of the Japanese, which is not detached from the other” (Smith, 1983, p. 79, cited in Kondo, 1990, p. 29).

⁴https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20-%20v1%20c3%20%5Bbatoto%5D#page/n13/mode/2up (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

⁵https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20Vol.001%20Ch.006%20Black%20Ink%20Shou-chan%20%5BKissManga%5D#page/n7/mode/2up (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

(Gloss translation: Aki san has a request for me, I wonder what it is)

Shouhei: ええ

(Gloss translation: really?)

Shouhei: 兄ちゃんまさかサクタさんに金のこと探らせるつもりじゃ

(Gloss translation: I wonder if Nii-chan is trying to get Sakuta to find out about the money...)

Translation by Vhirx:

Sakuta: Oh yeah. Aki-san said she had something she wanted to ask me. I wonder what it is.

Shouhei: Erk... Brother, there's no way you're going to ask her to help you track down that money, ri...

These two examples are indicative of the translation strategy adopted by Vhirx to translate passages where no explicit reference to grammar gender is present in the source text. Vhirx's strategy, in short, was to make Shouhei refer to Akihiko as "him", while all the other characters refer to Akihiko as "her". However, as a result of this strategy of explicitation, Shouhei seems to repeatedly "misgender" Akihiko, as he uses a gender pronoun that does not correctly reflect the gender with which Akihiko identifies. While it is true that in the source text Shouhei calls Akihiko "elder brother", in practice Shouhei and the other characters avoid the use of gendered pronouns in the source text, as these are not commonly used in Japanese speech.

Vhirx understood explicit instances of misgendering as negative outcomes of his translation strategy, because he recognised the potential for his reader to react negatively to such misgendering. For this reason, he decided to address the potentially negative impression his translation may have effected by choosing to explain in greater detail both the Japanese sociolinguistic context and the rationale for his translation choices.

In the context of the present study, the paratextual elements that Vhirx inserted in the translation of *Kodomo*, in particular the footnotes at the end of each chapter, can be framed in terms of "self-reactiveness", understood as an agent's ability to direct action through "self-monitoring, performance self-guidance via personal standards, and corrective self-reactions" (Bandura, 2001, p. 8). The translation notes inserted in *Kodomo* are so numerous that it is impossible to cover them all here; in this section, however, the focus will be on those that deal with the issue of gendered pronouns in translation, which has been examined above. As regards the translation of gendered pronouns, Vhirx explained:

Regarding Aki-chan and pronouns: personal pronouns are a very, very important matter in identity construction in the West (in part because of how commonly we use them) but the Japanese language does not routinely use such pronouns, forcing some admittedly awkward and complicated choices regarding how others refer to her that were not present in the original text.⁶

⁶https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20-%20v1%20c3%20%5Bbatoto%5D#page/n19/mode/2up (Accessed: 15 January 2019).



Figure 2. *Kodomo Wa Wakatte Agenai*, volume 1, p. 54.



Figure 3. *Kodomo Wa Wakatte Agenai*, volume 1, p. 102.

Returning to the same issue in a later chapter, Vhix further explained:

Many intelligent readers of the series have noted the manner in which Moji Shouhei misgenders Aki-chan by 1) continually referring to Aki-chan [as] “brother”, and 2) using male pronouns (...). I think many Western readers, especially those familiar with feminist

studies/issues, trans rights studies/issues, and/or linguistics might look more harshly on Moji Shouhei here than the Japanese context demand[s].

Furthermore, the way in which Moji Shouhei utilizes “brother” comes off a little bit differently in Japanese than it does in English (...). In an English context, this “role” designation is far more limited and the gendered notion of the words at issue has more actively political-linguistic implications. So Moji Shouhei’s use of “brother” may seem more retrograde and less permissive in English but more natural, more permissible, or more understandable, at the very least, in the Japanese context.

In translating the series, I was faced with a major writing question: was there a way that I could craft fluent sentences matching the intricacy of the original Japanese language without using a single third person pronoun for Aki-chan? I thought about it, worked on it. I came up with “no”. No way. Too many wordy repetition issues with multiple instance of “Aki” or “brother” in the same sentence. Which led to the following two choices:

- 1) Moji Shouhei uses “she” + “brother”?
- 2) Moji Shouhei uses “he” + “brother”?

The former choice creating unmanageable cognitive dissonance (“why is he misgendering Aki on one hand and not the other?”) and the latter creating a more persistent retrograde and potentially more aggressive reading of certain lines when viewed through a WESTERN context.⁷

Vhix seems to be aware of the possibility of an ethnocentric reading of his translation, so he goes to great lengths to explain the context for his choices to Western readers: “if you’re approaching Moji Shouhei from an exclusively Western context without considering these translation decisions, this translation context, and the Japanese context from which the series was written, you’re missing key points by applying a Western perspective to a product of another culture”.⁸

The quotations above are indicative of the way in which scanlators not only make choices and action plans, but are also able to regulate their strategies by periodically evaluating the quality of their translation in light of the personal goals and standards they set for themselves. According to Bandura (2001, p. 8), this is an important aspect of agency, because adopting personal standards and monitoring actions give direction to people’s pursuits and result in the self-satisfaction and self-worth necessary to sustain their effort to attain a goal.

Lastly, it is interesting to illustrate the degree of self-reflection involved in amateur translation with some examples from my own conversation with Vhix. In his e-mails, Vhix explained that his scanlation projects mainly focus on shorter manga works by lesser known authors, with a particular emphasis on works that deal with the themes related to family. Vhix explained that “perhaps the most common theme in *One Snowshoe* revolves around family formation/construction/disintegration, which is very interesting to me for personal reasons and more quasi-academic reasons relating to my own experiences in and studies of Japan and Japanese contexts” (personal conversation, 24 May 2016). Vhix described

⁷https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20-%20v2%20c14%20%5Bbatoto%5D#page/n17/mode/2up (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

⁸https://archive.org/stream/manga_Kodomo_wa_Wakatte_Agenai/Kodomo%20wa%20Wakatte%20Agenai%20-%20v2%20c14%20%5Bbatoto%5D#page/n19/mode/2up (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

himself as a man in his thirties currently living in the US, having previously lived and worked in Japan for several periods of time. He has a degree in East Asian Studies from an American university and has worked for Japanese companies in the US.

When pressed to elaborate on his translation choices, in particular in relation to the specific problems he experienced in translating gender pronouns in *Kodomo* and his motivation for adding translation notes to the texts, Vhix explained that he was compelled to posit a clarification for his readers because he is aware that the current politics around pronouns and gender in the US means that Shouhei could be perceived as intolerant in the context of the manga, rather than just going through a process of acceptance (personal communication, 1 September 2016).

Vhix also clarified that some of his readers perceived the instances of misgendering as deliberately hostile. He was compelled to address his American readers specifically in order to help them understand the Japanese linguistic and cultural environment from which *Kodomo* emerged, so that they could better appreciate the work. To justify the importance of his translation notes, Vhix wrote a lengthy comment explaining how he understood the dangers involved in reading older literary works without a proper context:

But let's put it like this. When we consume media, we bring our own baggage, our own perspectives with us. But to appreciate what's going on in a narrative, I think one often needs to don the spectacles of context of the work i.e. in teaching *Huckleberry Finn*, it's incredibly important to point out to young students to look beyond the naming of the character "Nigger Jim", to look at his complex relationship with Huck, and to understand how avant-garde the depiction was at the time. In teaching Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, it's important to understand the white privilege and the narrative of the white saviour that runs through the work... but similarly to understand how avant-garde the depiction of a smart, successful, charismatic black man was in any perspective. In teaching *Anna Karenina*, it's important to point out that, yes, the narrative fails the Bechdel test in the sense that so much of Anna's character is bound up in her relationships with and loves for men... but equally important to emphasize how much agency her character had relative to peer depictions of the time, etc. So many works like this. Understanding the context of Edna in Chopin's *The Awakening*, Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or Ito the butler in *Auntie Mame*, Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, etc. Likewise, I wouldn't show someone Akira Kurosawa's *High and Low* or Oshima's *Cruel Story of Our Youth* or *Night and Fog* in Japan without at some point explaining to them the context of the years immediately following World War II in Japan. The drugs. The slums. The reconstruction. The black market. The struggle for pride and identity. The alienation (personal communication, 1 September 2016).

In the context of the present study, the quote above can be framed as an instance of translator's self-reflectiveness, understood as the "metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Through self-reflection people are able to judge the correctness of their predictions against the outcomes of their actions, evaluate their motivations and the meaning of their life pursuits, and address conflicts in motivation (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Bandura (2001, p. 10) emphasises the importance of self-reflectiveness for the verification of the soundness of one's thinking, in particular for efficacy beliefs: "Unless people believe they can produce

desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties”.

Despite the problems caused by the decontextualising effects of translation, Vhirx’s beliefs in the power of literary works to transport readers to different places and historical periods is what motivates his activities as a scanlator. Accordingly, his goal as a manga translator is to open a window onto less explored sides of Japanese society, particularly relating to the representation of changing Japanese families.

The aim of this article has been to illustrate in more detail how an amateur translator exercises agency in the field of manga scanlation. One of the limitations of this approach is that it focuses on the aims, beliefs and justifications that sustain the translator’s activities without trying to understand whether the translation achieved its intended result on the reader. As a way of conclusion, it is important to draw attention to how two readers responded to the scanlation of *Kodomo*. Vhirx set himself clear goals for this translation project: he would translate a minor manga work, and he would translate it as a serious work of literature. Was he successful?

While an empirically exhaustive answer to this question cannot be provided within the limited scope of this article, two online reviews can help shed some light on this question. The first was published by a user named Sunney on the website Amino:⁹

Having changed his gender, Akihiro (Aki-chan) was kicked out of his home as a teen, and has since then lived independently; managing to make a living by working odd-jobs. But his brother continues to stand by his side, loving him for who he is. Shouhei continues to call Akihiko his “brother” not out of spite or insult, but rather, because his bond with his sibling remains strong. Why? Simply because Shouhei is a child. It doesn’t matter whatever gender his brother chooses to identify as – Akihiko will always be his brother, and he’ll always love him for who he is.

Tajima sensei’s skill shines precisely because of this. By giving us a child’s perspective, we get to see the world in the manga with unbridled innocence and compassion. The same is done with Sakuta’s relationship with her biological father; never questioning his intentions but bearing unexplained love and affection for him. As a result, what is established throughout the manga is an atmosphere that’s bittersweet, yet gentle and reassuring. We get to experience familial relationships as they are; free from gender restrictions, free from societal expectations, free from façades: which is exactly what makes the manga an extremely heartwarming read.

This quotation suggests that Sunney appreciated the fact that preserving the word “brother” was instrumental in understanding the relationship between Shouhei and Akihiko from the perspective of the child.

⁹https://aminoapps.com/c/anime/page/blog/ignorance-isnt-bliss-kodomo-wa-wakatte-agenai-manga-discussion/bEto_umzdxGY1IDKowmqoG4v5J4v6G (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

The second online review, by Emiliers, briefly comments on *Kodomo* as part of a personal review of manga works that feature positive representations of sexual minorities:¹⁰

Kodomo wa Wakatte Agenai: A manga about a girl who decides to look for her birth father and the male classmate she enlists to help. A very low-key, slice-of-life mystery. The main male lead's older sibling is a trans woman who moonlights sometimes as a detective. The only instance of misgendering is that she's still referred to as "brother" by her younger brother, but this reference is explained in-manga in a way that felt relatable. (The scanlators also take care to include end notes which explain their decisions in translating.) Otherwise, this is one of the few manga with a trans character whose presence is pivotal to the plot but their transness isn't. Aki is trans because *she just is*. It's very refreshing to see.

The comment by Emiliers also seems to indicate that she interpreted the instances of misgendering as understandable in the context of the story and that, in her opinion, they did not detract from the overall positive representation of Akihiko. Both reviewers show great appreciation for Vhix's effort to present a challenging manga work to a new readership in a way that minimised the potential for misunderstanding that arises during the process of translation.

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¹⁰ [https://emiliers.wordpress.com/2016/08/28/manga-rec-list-lgbtqi-\].](https://emiliers.wordpress.com/2016/08/28/manga-rec-list-lgbtqi-].) characters (Accessed: 15 January 2019).

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