

# TRANSLATING COMICS

## It's Not Just In The Bubble

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### Introduction

Comics go by many names – graphic novels, sequential art, bande dessinée, çizgi roman – and when they are translated, the passage from one language to another may entail shifting cultural connotations. In spite of cultural differences, however, the ability of comics to create narrative and emotional impact by combining visual and textual elements remains constant. In this article, we will explore some of the unique characteristics of comics as a medium and discuss the challenges and opportunities these may present for comics translators.

We will begin by establishing the origin and development of comics as an art form. Building on this historical understanding, and within the framework of some prominent theoretical work on comics, we will highlight certain key considerations relating to the translation of comics. Finally, we will contextualize our findings using a number of real-life examples from comics translated from French to Turkish and from Turkish to English. The historical and analytical section of this paper was prepared by both authors, while the final section focuses on Canan Marasligil's personal experiences as a professional translator. Our analysis is designed to illustrate the unique potential of comics for translation and to encourage curiosity and intercultural dialogue among comics creators and literary translators.

Before we begin our analysis however, a note on terminology is required. Throughout the comics industry and academia, naming conventions with regard to comics have been a source of considerable debate. During the latter half of the twentieth century, when aspiring comics artists in the English-speaking world were trying to establish comics as a legitimate art form, the term 'graphic novel' was proposed, and adopted, in order to set certain works apart from the more widely known 'comic books'. However, we do not subscribe to the usefulness of this distinction and throughout this paper we have opted to use the broader term 'comics' and the more descriptive title 'sequential art' interchangeably in order to avoid repetition.

## From Funny Pages to Graphic Novels: A Brief History of Comics

The most well known narrative regarding the emergence of comics as a medium is their rise from disposable entertainment to respected art form in the English-speaking world during the twentieth century. However, the practice of juxtaposing images, often without a textual component, with the aim of conveying meaning (narrative or otherwise) that goes beyond the individual images on their own, has a rich history. Scott McCloud, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, identifies examples of sequential art in pre-Columbian screenfolds and the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry (1993:12). McCloud admits that the exact origin of comics is hard to pinpoint in history; however, ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman wall paintings and murals, as well as Japanese scrolls, all incorporate certain aspects of his refined definition of comics as ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence’ (9).

Although these examples illustrate the rich and diverse heritage of sequential art in the history of human culture, they bear no direct relation to the modern comics industry. For the emergence of comics as we have come to recognise them, we must look to the work of eighteenth-century British artist William Hogarth. In her analysis of Hogarth, Joyce Goggin illustrates his ‘innovative use of serial format and of graphic proliferation’ and argues that Hogarth’s work constitutes one of the earliest instances of required reader involvement in constructing narrative structure (2010:13). According to Goggin, Hogarth was fully aware that his works utilised what McCloud defines as ‘closure’, a fundamental concept in understanding comics that will be discussed in the next section.

Goggin also notes that the growing awareness of the potential of sequential art evident in Hogarth’s work was furthered by the emerging market economy and the expanding art market (2010:22). She claims that ‘[t]he sentimental look and its capacity to draw spectators in and hold them, while making them part of the spectacle or image is [...] precisely what makes Hogarth's progresses, and the comics medium in general, so very engaging’ (2010:17). While some of the fundamental components of modern comics were established by Hogarth in the eighteenth century and by Rudolphe Topffer in the mid-nineteenth century, the emergence of the comics industry as we know it today depended on a number of developments in production and markets that would emerge early in the twentieth century.

Industrialisation of the printing press, driven by steam power and other efficiency improvements, allowed for reduced costs and for increased production. The availability of cheap, *pulp* paper reduced the cost of publication still further. However, the first category of texts to take advantage of these developments was not comics but so-called ‘pulp’ novels and magazines. Mostly falling into the category of horror, fantasy and other genre literature, pulp novels became a highly popular form of entertainment in the late nineteenth century, offering escapist fantasies to an increasingly literate population. Newspapers, which had already existed for centuries, also became much more prevalent and began to reach wider

sections of the population. To broaden their appeal, newspapers started publishing ‘funnies’ or ‘funny pages’ featuring cartoons.

It is important to note that the serial nature of these media was an important factor in determining one of the fundamental characteristics of comics. In his study of serialised storytelling in comics, Daniel Wullner highlights the proliferation of serialisation in the nineteenth century: it was famously adopted by figures such as Dickens, and led to the emergence of pulp magazines. Wullner writes that ‘although pulp magazines did not succeed economically, their content and themes were responsible, in large part, for the first serial comics narratives’ (2010:45). Moreover, in addition to pulp magazines providing the financial and thematic foundation for comics, Wullner argues that ‘it was only through the serialization of comic strips that readers were introduced to notion that words and images could work together on the printed page’ (2010:46). Modern comics still build on the framework provided by serial narratives, and develop their narratives and character mythologies around the continuous and cyclical nature of their storytelling.

Ultimately, the emergence of the modern comic book industry in the United States can be traced back to a combination of the technological advances of the industrial printing press, the availability of cheap *pulp* paper, and the market segments pioneered by popular genre literature. The social and economic implications arising from these beginnings in the late 1920s have continued to impact upon comics as an art form ever since.

In the following decades comics became a staple for any culture that embraced the printing press, from Algeria to Japan. With the growing popularity and diversity of comics, comics creators gradually embraced their artistic impulses, resulting in increasingly audacious and unique styles and movements and much longer works, occasionally called ‘graphic novels’. Regardless of genre or country of origin, at the beginning of the twenty-first century comics are still one of the most popular and beloved forms of communication media. The numerous artistic and cultural trends within the medium still recall the initial strengths and characteristics that made it so explosively popular a century ago.

## Invisible Gutters and Ethereal Balloons: How Comics Work

The huge popularity and broad appeal of comics is due in part to the mechanics by which they communicate their message. These mechanics – although artistic choices and cultural conventions may result in different interpretations – continue to define sequential art, and a basic understanding of them is crucial in order to capture the essential meaning of a comics artwork in translation. Although the scope of this essay does not permit us to fully explore these individual components, we will aim to provide a useful description, and McCloud's *Understanding Comics* remains a very accessible guide for further reading.

McCloud begins his analysis by discussing the power of iconic depictions available through cartoons (1993:29). According to McCloud, the abstraction involved in the cartoon enables the audience to project their identity more readily and thus amplify involvement (1993:36). 'The Cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!' (ibid). Comics artists utilise this power for different effects. By contrasting realistic backgrounds against a cartoonish character, an artist can position the reader inside the impactful surroundings with ease. This technique is most visibly employed by Herge in *Tintin* but also by artists like Joe Sacco whose works of comics journalism place a cartoonish depiction of himself against realistic renditions of war-torn Bosnia and Palestine, both to draw in the reader and to emphasize the otherness of the journalist in the field. Although not directly related to the textual component of comics, understanding stylistic choices and their underlying cultural connotations with regard to cartooning can be beneficial for the translator.

The second, and arguably the most fundamental, mechanic of comics highlighted by McCloud is 'closure', defined as 'observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (1993:63). In comics, closure manifests itself when two panels separated by what is called the gutter are perceived by the reader as a connected and continuous reality. According to McCloud, the gutter, and the closure it leads to, is 'the heart of comics' (1993:66). The voluntary and conscious involvement of the reader in constructing the meaning of the narrative is unique to comics and is also one of the reasons for the remarkable potential for immersion it offers to its audiences. Comics artists employ gutters to their full narrative potential by constructing various types of transitions for different storytelling purposes. McCloud identifies possible transitions that can occur between panels from *moment-to-moment*, *action-to-action*, *subject-to-subject*, *scene-to-scene*, *aspect-to-aspect* and *non-sequitur* (1993:70). The frequency of these transitions in any given comic is influenced by the cultural norms in the country of origin and by the prevailing artistic trends in different eras. Understanding the fundamental concept of closure is essential for a comics translator, and an appreciation

of the effects of different types of transition is beneficial in establishing the all-important connection between the visual elements and the textual content of the work in question.

Building on these fundamental mechanics, comics artists also express themselves through the shape, placement and size of panels, and the style and tone of their line. Moreover, they use the attributes of word balloons to emphasise textual elements, in addition to the narrative devices made possible by the combination of visual and textual components.

Various attributes of panels can be used to set the tone and, more importantly, to establish the passage of time. Additionally, the whole of the expressive palette available to a visual artist using lines is also open to a comics artist, and this too contributes to setting the tone of the narrative. A translator with an awareness of the visual choices made by artists may well be more attuned to the interplay between the visual and the textual elements of a comic.

More directly related to the textual component of comics, and therefore to the task of the comics translator, are the various attributes of balloons. Balloons are the constant companions of words in comics, and an understanding of their nuances may help the translator to grasp the significance of individual utterances. In their analysis of the balloon, Forceville, Veale and Feyaerts note that it is 'one of the most defining visual conventions of the comics medium' (2010:56). Following their analysis of comics from different eras and countries of origin, the authors argue that 'balloons also communicate a great deal of ancillary meaning via their shape, color, location, size, and the orientation of their tails or thought bubbles' (2010:57). In addition to determining the source and destination of verbal or non-verbal information, balloons also indicate the *nature* of the information and provide context for their contents (2010:66). An understanding of the basic principles governing the choice of work and thought balloons in comics is therefore invaluable to the translator. As the researchers demonstrate, not all sentences are uttered the same way and the keys to understanding them are hidden in their containers. As with artistic choices regarding lines and panel types, the frequency and types of balloons used in comics are heavily influenced by local styles and should be considered as part of the translation effort.

Having analysed the fundamental components of comics as a medium and discussed the possible impact of these components on the task of the translator, we will now illustrate some of the practical issues involved in translating comics using examples drawn from personal experience.

## The Perspective of a Comics Reader, Translating Comics

Every translator is at first a reader. If this is true for prose writing, it is certainly true for comics, and the previous sections have demonstrated the importance of understanding the way the medium works. My personal experience with comics is not limited to reading and translating but also includes curating, writing for comics, writing about comics and developing activities off the page, such as workshops where I have used comics as an essential medium for creative expression. This close involvement with the medium allows me to be well-connected to the comics world and its actors, and this familiarity in turn makes me love the medium even more.

The first comic I ever translated was a six-page story by an Algerian comics artist, Nawel Louerrad, whose work I first saw when I visited the International Comics Festival of Algiers in 2011. I was immediately deeply moved by Louerrad's work and felt the urge to make it available in another language, just as I sometimes hear the voice of an author in poetry or prose that I feel must be heard in another language – usually French, but sometimes English and Turkish. Nawel Louerrad's story was originally written in French so my target language became English, for various reasons: the English language offers better opportunities for dissemination than Turkish does, and I already had a publisher in mind. USA-based Words Without Borders, an online review of translated literature and comics which I follow almost religiously, have a yearly graphic issue. Following a number of articles about the comics festival of Algiers and an overview of Algerian comics, which laid the groundwork for the publication of my translation, I introduced Nawel's work to the editors (Marasligil, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). *Monstrez-vous* was published as *Demonstrate* in the 2012 graphic issue of Words Without Borders (Nawel, 2012).

I would like to highlight two important points in relation to this particular translation: firstly, I have switched one of my usual target languages (French and Turkish) to English. I do not usually translate into English, especially not prose. I write in English, in my own voice, but I rarely play with other people's voices in English, being less confident in it than in my two main languages, Turkish and French. But this was a special case. As I have mentioned, my translator's urge simply cried out: 'This work has to be read by non-French-speakers – just translate it!' I started to play with the language, trying to find the right equivalent for 'Monstrez-vous', to feel the character's alienation, the solitude, so beautifully expressed by Nawel's drawings; so well expressed, in fact, that the text was almost accessory. Nawel later told me: "You made it sound better in English". This is probably the most wonderful thing a translator can ever hear from an author.

This first experience of translating comics and my other work with the medium, especially as co-curator of Istanbulles: the International Comics Festival of Istanbul, resulted

in commissions from a Turkish publisher, Marmara Çizgi, who have published (among other titles) *Berlin, Bone, Amazing Spiderman, The Walking Dead* and the works of Enki Bilal in Turkish. I have been asked to translate two series of comics for them: Alejandro Jodorowsky (writer) and François Boucq's (artist) *Bouncer* and Xavier Dorison (writer) and Christophe Bec's (artist) *Sanctuaire*. The two works are completely different; one is a Western and the other a science-fiction story set in a submarine. Both works have allowed me to evaluate myself as a translator and to learn more about this very particular art form.

Jodorowsky has a vast bibliography – even if you know very little about comics, you may have heard of works such as *The Incal*, which features artwork by the late Moebius, another giant in the comics world. Worrying about jumping from a fairly unknown comics artist to such a widely respected one was not a matter of elitism. It had more to do with an awareness of the audience: readers of Marmara Çizgi are avid comics readers who wait with great enthusiasm for new titles to appear. But I soon got over my fear when I took the work into my own hands and started translating.

“You are used to translating prose, aren't you?” asked my editor Ilke Keskin, an excellent and very experienced translator of comics from English to Turkish, when he read my first draft. He was right: most of my experience had been in translating prose and some poetry, but translating comics was fairly new to me. “Texts in comics are dialogues – you need to render them as such,” said Keskin.

This had of course been absolutely clear to me when I'd read the story in French, but I realized on rereading my Turkish translation that I had indeed mistranslated some dialogues. My cowboy character was way too polite in Turkish, and so there was a gap between the image and the text in the speech bubble. My task as a translator is also to identify the context in which the character is speaking by analysing the images, not only in one panel but within the whole story. It is easy to spot dialogue in a prose text when the author clearly identifies it as such. With comics, however, although speech bubbles make it apparent that the text represents dialogue, the tone of voice still needs to be identified according to the characters as well as the context in which they are speaking. While seemingly not so different from translating prose, the challenges presented by comics – the ones already outlined in the earlier sections of this paper – are often hidden in plain sight, woven into the unique language of comics.

Linked to the question of spoken language is the specific issue of onomatopoeias. Although phonetic imitation of sounds are also found in prose texts, they are used more extensively in comics.

The use of onomatopoeia in comics dates back to the early twentieth century. Popular culture historian Tim DeForest notes the impact of Roy Crane, the creator of *Captain Easy* and *Buz Sawyer*, on the popularisation of onomatopoeias (DeForest, 2004:116):

It was Crane who pioneered the use of onomatopoeic sound effects in comics, adding "bam," "pow" and "wham" to what had previously been an almost entirely visual vocabulary. Crane had fun with this, tossing in an occasional "ker-splash" or "lickety wop" along with what would become the more standard effects. Words as well as images became vehicles for carrying along his increasingly fast-paced storylines.

DC comics even introduced a super villain named Onomatopoeia, created by writer Kevin Smith and artist Phil Hester, in 2002. The enemy of Green Arrow and Batman, he imitated sounds around him and killed non-superpowered superheroes. Kevin Smith says about his character in a 2007 interview:

When I did Green Arrow, I went with Onomatopoeia for a villain, just because I loved that word, and it kind of formed the character inasmuch as he would say sounds out loud. It only kind of works – I think – on a comic book page because if you have a gun going off, they usually write BLAM! and then you can have, you know, the character saying "BLAM!" in a word balloon, but like if you tried to do that cinematically you can't really rock it. A gun in a film sounds completely different. It doesn't read as BLAM! and so to have a dude say BLAM! after a true gunshot, all these people would be like "he's just retarded". I think it works great in print and on a comic book page. I don't think that character would translate very well outside of that.

Onomatopoeia is particularly difficult to translate because even if a particular sound is heard similarly by people of different cultures, it is often expressed using different consonant strings in different languages. For instance, when eating, a character may utter the following sounds: 'yum yum' or 'nom nom nom' in English, 'miam miam' in French, and 'ham hum' or 'nam nam' in Turkish. A beating sound will be 'ba boom' or 'thump thump' in English, 'bom bom' or sometimes 'poum poum' in French, and 'güm güm' or 'küt küt' in Turkish. Even within a language, the sound selected may vary depending on the motivation for it. If you are in love, your heart will go 'ba boom', 'poum poum' and 'küt küt'. For many onomatopoeias you can find equivalents in a dictionary or by searching online, but there will be times when you will need to be creative and will hear yourself uttering bizarre sounds and trying to write them down.<sup>1</sup> Thinking about the reader in the language, you will also take the image into account: even if you cannot find the perfect sound match, the visual language will be there to help you and the reader to figure out what sound was made by kicking that particularly weirdly-noised wooden box or any object from the comic artist's own imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> As a starting point, Wikipedia provides a collection of cross-linguistic onomatopoeias: [Wikipedia: Cross-linguistic Onomatopoeias](#)

So is translating comics about translating language? It certainly is. It involves playing with words, being creative, knowing the target language and target readers, having a feeling for the original story and the medium in which it is presented. All in all, the process is not so different from any literary translation: you must know and love your material.

## Conclusion

In this essay, we have aimed to provide an introduction to comics as a medium and discuss some of the particular issues regarding translation of comics. Having emerged from a rich artistic background and been sustained by a resilient business model, the modern comics industry remains relevant and strong with a broad reach across numerous cultures and genres. With the rise of digital distribution and falling barriers to entry, the potential for intercultural dialogue through comics has never been stronger, which is both an opportunity and a challenge for the translator interested in working with comics. In our historical overview, we presented only one of the foundational myths of comics and other cultures around the world have their own stories about how comics originated. Understanding how comics work and the devices they use to construct narrative is crucial for translators of comics, and we have tried to provide a framework for some of the key tenets of the medium. The so-called *Golden Age* of American superhero comics may have ended sixty years ago but the diversity in comics have never been richer and we hope that in this paper we have provided the motivation and impulse for translators to contribute to the most engaging form of media yet to be devised.

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