



Sound Symbolism and the Aesthetics of Translation:

A Study of Ishikawa Takuboku's Tanka and Its Hindi Translation

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Abstract

This study examines the role of sound symbolism i.e., the relationship between sound and meaning in Japanese tanka poetry appearing in *Ichiaiku no Suna* (A Handful of Sand) written by Ishikawa Takuboku, with particular attention to its aesthetic, linguistic, and translational dimensions. Sound symbolism, a vital poetic device in both Indian and Japanese traditions, deepens emotional resonance and enriches imagery. In Japanese poetry, onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions (*giongo*, *gitaigo*, and *giyōgo*) are especially prominent, representing not only auditory phenomena but also movement, emotion, and psychological states. According to the researcher's limited observation, Japanese and Hindi differ in the frequency and manner of their mimetic usage. These differences can pose occasional difficulties when attempting to convey finer mimetic nuances across the two languages. The paper analyses Takuboku's tanka poems as instances of complex sound-symbolic expression, illustrating how phonetic patterns evoke emotion, rhythm, and atmosphere. Through close readings of the text the study explores how translators negotiate semantic and grammatical differences while preserving aesthetic integrity. Translation strategies such as direct imitation, addition, and symbolic substitution are discussed as effective means to retain both sound and sense. The research concludes that poetic translation demands more than linguistic accuracy; it requires the recreation of phonetic imagery and emotional texture that define the original. Sound symbolism thus emerges as a vital bridge between linguistic form and aesthetic experience, revealing how the subtle interplay of sound, emotion, and meaning sustain the universality and timeless beauty of poetic expression.

Keywords: Ishikawa Takuboku, Tanka, Translation, Sound symbolism, Imagery

Introduction

Sound plays a fundamental role in shaping the emotional and aesthetic essence of poetry. The phenomenon known as sound symbolism, the intrinsic relationship between sound and sense, bridges phonetics, psychology, and poetics. Across languages, poets exploit this relationship to evoke mood, rhythm, and imagery beyond semantic meaning. Both Indian and Japanese literary traditions have long recognized the expressive potential of sound as a vehicle of aesthetic experience. In each tradition, sound serves not merely as ornamentation but as a medium through which emotion and perception become inseparable.

This study explores the aesthetic and linguistic dimensions of sound symbolism with special reference to the works of the modern Japanese poet Ishikawa Takuboku (1886–1912) and their Hindi translations. Takuboku's *tanka* poems are deeply rooted in introspection and emotional precision, where sound not only mirrors mood but also manifests psychological tension. Through onomatopoeia, *mimetic expressions* (*giongo*, *gitaigo*, *giyōgo*), and phonetic rhythm, his poetry reflects the subtle interplay between language, perception, and feeling.

The purpose of this study is to examine how sound symbolism operates in Takuboku's poetry and how its aesthetic effect can or cannot be preserved through translation into Hindi. It further investigates how linguistic structures and cultural soundscapes affect translatability.

The research adopts a comparative textual analysis with an inductive approach, focusing on selected *tanka* poems of Takuboku from the anthology *Ichiaku no suna* (*A handful of Sand*) and their respective Hindi translations. By closely analysing phonetic patterns, onomatopoetic forms, and syntactic positioning of mimetic words, the study identifies how sound symbolism generates emotional resonance and how translators reproduce or adapt to these effects.

This approach allows for both micro-level analysis (sound patterns, phonetic equivalence, syntactic shifts) and macro-level interpretation (cultural aesthetics, poetic emotive, and translation ethics).

Sound Symbolism and its Functions as Poetic Device

Generally, nature of connection between the sound and the meaning is natural. However, as De Saussure argues that the relation between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary and natural i.e., the sound and the meaning is not expressed in absolute terms. (De Saussure, 1916)

The sound symbolism found in Keats's poetry suggests that poetry must be written in phonetic transcription and make efforts to depict the thematic sound dominant in the poem. Accordingly, the word should be constructed keeping the dominant sound in the poem. Such words he termed "summative words" which fulfil the criteria of being on the same level of representative sound, in terms of meaning, they should conform to the theme of the poem and the position of these words should be culminating in nature. (Hymes, 1960)

Generally, there are two types of sound symbolisms i.e., denotation of individual sound and the onomatopoeias. The first type of symbol expresses the certain mood of the poem. Usually, long vowels signify the pathetic emotion of the poet, whereas nasal consonant and vowels express tunefulness of a melody. Fricative sounds denote the silence, loneliness, or peaceful mood. Laterals have roles to express the activity or motion in the poem. Also, fricative 'h' sound generally depicts pathos. However, there is no established and absolute convention to determine the denotation of the certain individual sound. Especially, in case of Hindi language poetry, it is difficult to determine if the certain individual sound has a particular mood to express. Though, some assumptions can be made and observed.

On the other hand, onomatopoeia is defined as the words which are formed by emulating the natural sounds. The literal meaning of onomatopoeia is "making of words". In the Oxford English- English- Hindi dictionary, the meaning of the onomatopoeia is given as follows; 'the fact of words containing sounds similar to the noises they describe, for example 'hiss' or 'thud'; the use of words like this in a piece of writing.' (Kumar and Sahai, 2008). Onomatopoeic forms that which denote a sound or an object and gives sounds and 'imitative' and 'onomatopoeic' are equivalents. (Bloomfield, 1933)

In Hindi, Bahri classifies the semantic types of 'onomatopoeic' words as follows.

1. Direct imitation 2. Action 3. Originator of the sound 4. Symbolized onomatopoeia 5.

Abstract ideas 6. State of mind 7. Echo words 8. Nursery words 9. Learned Etymologies

He compares onomatopoeias with chemical mixtures in which each element is different and contains their own quality. However, words which are changed in meanings are similar to chemical compounds in which all elements have sacrificed their properties into the other elements. (Bahri, 1959)

Sound symbolism is one of the major characteristics of Japanese language which make it more distinct language. In Japanese language, *onomatopoeia* (*giongo*), *phenomimes* (*gitaigo*) and *psychomimes* (*gijōgo*) also known as mimetic expressions are prominent and their usage is also frequent. The phonetic depiction of a phenomena (*gitaigo*) which are perceived by non-auditory sense is expressed through these words and they play crucial role in daily language. Moreover, *psychomimes*, the phonetic representation of psychological state, finds a significant space in Japanese spoken and written language. The sound symbolism is treated as adverbs in Japanese so the usage of “*to*” along with them is necessary. (Makio and Michio, 1994)

The study shows that there are very few languages which contain abundance of mimetic and onomatopoeic expressions as Japanese. Some of their examples are Korean and African languages. Hence, translatability of such expressions is a major challenge in other languages. However, Hindi also has mimetic expressions that function as adverbs, though they operate differently and with varying frequency compared to those in Japanese.

The poet uses the selective vocabulary in their poems to give the effects and those words often contain another meaning also than their dictionary meaning due to their sound. This very relation of a word with the sound is the characteristics of those selective words. However, these selective words create challenges for the translator. (Tiwary and Chaturvedi, 1980)

S.H.V Agyeya suggests that translation of traditional form of poetry such as *haiku* is critical as it must maintain the aesthetics in terms of expressing sound and meaning together keeping its brevity on mind. (Tiwary and Chaturvedi, 1980)

たらたらたらたらたらと
雨滴が
病むあたまにひびくかなしさ (Takuboku, 1910)

टिप.....टिप.....
बारिश की बूंदे
भेद जाती दुखते मन को । (researcher)

tip.....tip.....
shūlsībārishkībūnde
bhed jātī dukhate man ko.

The task of translating the poem's mimetic expressions is rendered complex by the poet's experimental deployment of sound symbolism. The process of translation, therefore, entailed a twofold task: first, to interpret the semantic and phonetic significance of the sound symbol *tara tara*, employed between the mimetic expression of the raindrop *tan*, and second, to identify an appropriate equivalent for this expression within the Hindi linguistic and cultural framework.

Kondō Norihiko (Kondo, 2008) observes that the mimetic sound of rain does not evoke a sense of calmness for Takuboku; rather, it conveys an unsettling, almost tormenting auditory experience. The sound pattern of the raindrops is irregular and repetitive, falling intermittently at the same point on the roof. To represent this psychological and sensory perception, Takuboku employs *tara tara* to suggest the intermittent interval, while *tan* represents the actual sound of the raindrop. In essence, Takuboku hears each raindrop falling at measured intervals, and it is the anticipation of the next drop, the interval of sound that finds expression through *tara tara*. This subtle interplay between sound and silence reflects a characteristic feature of Takuboku's poetic style.

In the Hindi translation, following Hardev Bahri's classification, such onomatopoeic expressions fall under the category of *pratyakṣa anukaranātmak śabda* (direct imitative

words), which directly reproduce the actual sound of an object or action. In the source text, the Japanese terms serve as direct imitations of the sound of falling raindrops. Accordingly, the Hindi translation adopts a structurally similar approach, using the word *tip* to reproduce the direct sound of the raindrop. However, expressing the idea of the time gap between two drops may pose a translation challenge, as Hindi does not seem to have a single word that captures this nuance precisely. To address this, the convention of using ellipsis marks (...) between two onomatopoeic expressions has been employed to symbolically represent the gap between successive sounds.

In continuation with this poem, the subsequent composition by Takuboku also explores the aesthetic and semantic dimensions of sound symbolism. However, its translational approach differs in terms of the representation and interpretation of mimetic expressions. (Kumar, 2024)

こつこつと空地に石きざむ音
耳につき来ぬ
家に入るまで (Takuboku, 1910)

खट-खट-खट कानों को भेदती
मैदान में पत्थरों पर छेनी की चोट
घर में घुसने तक पीछा न छोड़ती। (researcher)

khaṭ-khaṭ-khaṭkānoṇ ko bhedatī
maidānmeṇpattharōṇ par chhenīkīchot
gharneṇghusanetakpīchhā n chhodatī.

The sound-symbol in the given poem has been translated following the direct imitation into Hindi which is *kat-kat-kat* the harsh and unpleasant striking sound of hammer and chisel on the rocks. Although in Japanese language of the source text, the onomatopoeic word is ‘action or movement’ onomatopoeia, in Hindi it is the ‘direct imitation’.

Apart from the issue of mimetic sound and its translation, the translation process required the use of the word *chheni*, which does not appear in the source text. This involves

applying the strategy of "addition." The researcher has employed this method to enhance the aesthetic effect and to bring clarity to the translation, without which the translated poem may not evoke the same impact as the original. It must be noted, however, that this is the researcher's own interpretive choice. There remains a possibility of accomplishing the translation without resorting to the addition method.

In this context, Agyeya's translation of Japanese *haiku* must be taken into consideration. Hindi poet Agyeya who is also the recipient of Jnanpeeth Award, has translated several Japanese *haiku* into Hindi. He composed his own *haiku* poetry. He visited Japan and learnt Zen practice and *Koan* in Buddhist monastery. Agyeya did not know Japanese language, but he was always in the company of Japanese intellectuals who helped him understand the depth of Japanese culture and subtle nuances of Japanese language. It is perhaps, because of his understanding of Japanese culture and spiritual values so closely, he was capable of translating *haiku* poetry effectively. Even though, the translation of *haiku* poetry is considered challenging due to its brevity, he was able to do it with ease. Therefore Agyeya is considered as one of the most successful translators of *haiku* in Hindi.

In this context, his Hindi translation of Matsuo Basho's famous haiku is significant to throw light on the challenges of translation and how Agyeya has overcome it. Basho's one of the most famous haiku's translation by Agyeya is given

古池や

蛙飛び込む

水の音

(Basho)

ताल

ताल पुराना

कूदा दादुर

—गुडप्

(Agyeya, 1959)

tāl

tālpurānā

kūdādādur

—guḍup

Here, translation for the expression 'mizu no oto' is done in one onomatopoeic word i.e. *gudup*. This word is unexpressed in original text. However, in Hindi translation expressing the image of the action using onomatopoeic word is the key strategy employed. This strategy gives tremendously beautiful effect to the poem. Agyeya once said that translation is which expresses the unexpressed

Hence, in the above translation of *tanka* as well, the unexpressed image lying behind the word 'kizamu' which means 'to carve' has been expressed which is deemed more appropriate in the target language.

In the translation of the following poem, the sound symbolism as onomatopoeia has been dealt with in the context of its grammatical usage and its equivalent in target language.

いのちなき砂のかなしさよ
さらさらと
握れば指のあひだより落つ (Takuboku, 1910)

कसूंतो उँगलियों के बीच से
सरसराती फिसलती जाती
व्यथित रेत अपना अस्तित्व खोजती। (researcher)

kasūṁ to uṅgaliyoṁ ke bīch se
sarasarātī fisalatījātī
vyathit ret apanā astitva khojatī .

In continuation with the translation of the onomatopoeia, the given translation sheds light on the major underlying issues for the translator. The word *sarasara to* in Japanese language functions as an adverb. However, the Hindi equivalent of *sarasara to* i.e., *sarasarātī* is acting as a verb which is known as 'action' onomatopoeic word i.e., *sarsarana* (to slip away) in infinitive form.

Aesthetically, the poem contains figure of speech i.e., *suna* (sand) as a metaphor which signifies the passing of time. As Kondo Norihiko explains referring to the dictionary (*nihonkokugodajiten*), the word *kanashisa* (sadness) means ‘feeling of innate sadness arises when things don’t work out, despite making efforts,’ (Kondo, 1993)

Therefore, Takuboku is feeling sadness through the sand which he finds is the reflection of his own existence. Kondo further observes that Takuboku perceives the falling of ‘sand’ through his fingers signifies how the precious time of his life passing without any significance. Since he is undergoing a traumatic phase of life when he composed these lines.

The inspiration of the poem has come from Toki Zenmaro’s *Nakiwarai*, originally written in Roman script which deals with ‘sand’ as given below. In the Toki’s poem, the ‘sand’ used in the term ‘sand clock’ signifies that life is also moving towards death along with the passage of time. However, Kondo argues that Takuboku unlike Toki, finds the life so precious which cannot be replaced, but because of his problems in life, it is passing worthlessly. Takuboku has borrowed the onomatopoeia *sarasara* from the same poem using it in different connotation. Takuboku’s adoption of the said expressions in his poem proves the strong emotions he attached with these terms being aware of the significance of them.

Conclusion

The study concludes that sound symbolism serves as a vital bridge between phonetic expression and aesthetic experience, thereby making it an essential dimension of poetic meaning. In Takuboku’s *tanka*, sound and emotion are interwoven to express solitude, transience, and inner conflict. His deliberate use of onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions such as *tan-tara-tara* for raindrops or *sarasara* for sand, creates multisensory imagery that transcends mere description.

The comparative analysis reveals that while Japanese poetry employs mimetic sound as an intrinsic grammatical and aesthetic device, Hindi translations must rely on creative compensation through rhythm, repetition, and imagery. Translators thus engage in a double task i.e., preserving the ‘sense of sound’ while recreating its ‘sound of sense.’

Strategies such as direct imitation, contextual substitution, and symbolic expansion become necessary to sustain the emotive texture of the original.

To this end, this research underscores that poetic translation is not only a linguistic act but an aesthetic negotiation. Sound symbolism, where sound, feeling, and expression meet, shows that translation should not focus only on word-for-word accuracy. Instead, it should aim to recreate the same emotional and acoustic effect in the new language. Through the comparative study of Japanese and Hindi poetics, this paper highlights how sound continues to shape the universal language of poetry, sustaining its rhythm across cultures and time.

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