

**Plotting Poetry 2025**

# **Transforming Poetic Thought into Waka:**

## **How to Pack the Skeleton into a 31-Syllable Closet**

- Bor Hodošček, [The University of Osaka](#)
- Hilofumi Yamamoto, [Institute of Science Tokyo](#)

thought2waka

# Project Goals

- Reverse-engineer modern interpretations into waka
- Identify compression patterns for poetic thought
- Explore constraints and expression in 31-mora form

# Basics of WAKA

## Japanese Song (Poem)

- WA → Japanese / Japanese style
- KA → Song

## Early Established Waka

- The Man'yōshū: est. around 7-8th century in Chinese notation.
- The Kokinshū: est. ca. 905 in Japanese notation.

## Style and Rhetorics

- Include only 31 syllables with 5,7,5,7,7 sounds
- Express natural views and emotions in a simple sentence.
- Use of rhetorics to create a poetic atmosphere:
  - Pun (kakekotoba),
  - Pillow words (makurakotoba), and
  - Introductory words (jo-kotoba)

## Kokin Wakashū Kana Preface

やまとうたは、人の心を種として、よろづの言の葉とぞなれりける。  
世の中にある人、ことわざ繁きものなれば、心に思ふことを、見るもの聞くものにつけて、言ひ出せるなり。

Japanese poetry (yamato-uta) takes the human heart as its seed, and from it grows a myriad of words and leaves. Since people living in this world are surrounded by countless events, they express what they feel in their hearts by attaching it to the things they see and hear.

## Kanajo: Preface of the Kokinshu

- Does not mention the 31-syllable form
  - The format is driven from the practice of poetic expression
  - Not too short, not too long, just right for expressing emotions
  - One theory suggests that the pleasantness of phonetics and rhythm (5-7 pattern),
  - The length of breath, and ease of recitation and transmission are involved.

## **Is 31-Syllable Form the Closet? No, it's not!**

- The 31-syllable is the final form of the poem, not the initial one.
- The constraint of Waka is the construction of 5,7,5,7,7 syllables.
- Poets create a poem under the 5 segments of 5,7,5,7,7 syllables constraint.
- So, first poets seek words fitting each segment, then they combine them into a 31-syllable poem.



## Poetic Rules may include:

- Omission of grammatical elements
- Inversion of word order
- Symbolic substitution
- Nominalization
- Manipulation of ambiguity
- Compression of meaning
- Expansion of meaning
- Reinterpretation of context
- ...

# Material

- A) Kokinshu: a collection of 1000 waka poems
- B) Modern Japanese translations: 10 sets of translations

Parallel corpus of 1000 waka and 10 modern Japanese translations

## Ten kinds of the Translations

| No. | Translator                  | Year | Pages | Manuscript | Translation Style              |
|-----|-----------------------------|------|-------|------------|--------------------------------|
| 1.  | Kaneko Motoomi              | 1933 | 1105  | Teika      | Literal translation            |
| 2.  | Kubota Utsubo               | 1960 | 1449  | Teika      | Literal translation            |
| 3.  | Matsuda Takeo               | 1968 | 1998  | Teika      | Free translation               |
| 4.  | Ozawa Masao                 | 1971 | 544   | Teika      | Changes word order and grammar |
| 5.  | Takeoka Masao               | 1976 | 2278  | Teika      | Literal translation            |
| 6.  | Okumura Tsuneya             | 1978 | 434   | Teika      | Respects author's intent       |
| 7.  | Kusojin Hitaku              | 1979 | 1260  | Teika      | Supplements words              |
| 8.  | Komachiya Teruhiko          | 1982 | 407   | Teika      | Unknown                        |
| 9.  | Kojima Noriyuki & Arai Eizo | 1989 | 483   | Teika      | Unknown                        |
| 10. | Katagiri Yoichi             | 1998 | 3022  | Teika      | Literal translation            |

# Computer programmes

- Align waka with contemporary paraphrases
- Use phrase gloss and structured data
- Analyze rule types and transformation limits

# Challenges

- Literal vs. interpretive gaps
- Compression loss in reverse mapping
- Ambiguity in source expressions

# Toward a Model

- Create typology of transformation rules
- Visualize linguistic constraints
- Evaluate poetic fidelity and transformation cost

# Methods

- Using a parallel corpus of waka and modern Japanese translations
- Align waka with contemporary paraphrases
- Use phrase gloss and structured data
- Analyze rule types and transformation limits
- Identify compression patterns for poetic thought

## Steps

1. Calculating of the frequency of the conversion patterns
2. Clustering of the conversion patterns:
  - Grammatical, Lexical, Structural, Rhetorical etc.
3. Modeling of the conversion patterns:
  - Rule based, Statistical based etc.



# Results

- Identify and classify poetic strategies
- Analyze how poetic thought is transfigured
- Uncover underlying rules (overt and covert)
- Explore the implications of compression
- Simulate the transformation process:

# Discussion

- Explore poetic compression in modern Japanese
- Analyze constraints in poetic expression
- Discuss implications for translation and interpretation
- Consider cultural and linguistic factors

# Conclusion

- Waka as a lens for poetic thought
- Compression as a creative constraint
- Future research directions
- Implications for translation studies

## Conclusion

- Content of the work is impressive
- Author's skill is impressive as well