

Japanese Focus



Ever wanted to learn more about the Japanese behind the translations found for *Sailor Moon*? This article is for you! Each month you will find a new article demystifying complex translations or debunking rumors related to the original Japanese found in *Sailor Moon*. Here you'll find gratuitous use of linguistic vocabulary related to the study of Japanese as a foreign language. I will do my best to include footnotes for such vocabulary words at the end of each editorial.

As many of us are setting off on a new academic journey with a new school year, I think it's only fitting that we begin our segment with the soldier of wisdom: Sailor Mercury!

Today I want to analyse a common misconception about the meaning of Sailor Mercury's civilian identity, "Mizuno Ami". All over the internet, you will find people saying that the proper translation for this character's name is "**Asian Beauty of Water**", or "**Secondary Beauty of Water**". Sometimes you can even find it as "**Friend of Water**", which is way off!

I'm here to explain why these translations are misinformed. Let's take a close look at the Japanese kanji to find out why these translations aren't accurate:



Here's a picture of Mizuno Ami's - surname first - profile from a search Luna performs in Act 2 of the *Sailor Moon* manga. Here we find the creator's intended 'spelling' of this character's name. Now that we have the kanji, we can determine two things.

水野亜美

The name is of Japanese-origin; it is not foreign. If it were foreign, it would almost certainly be written in katakana – more on that later!

I propose that most of the meaning in her name comes from her surname, and that if people look too hard trying to find as much meaning in "Ami", things will get muddled.

First, let's break everything down kanji by kanji.

水

This is the kanji for the word "mizu", meaning water. Sometimes, when paired with other kanji to make "compounds", it is pronounced as "sui" – but we'll come back to that in a moment!

野

This is the kanji for the word "no" – this particular kanji signifies the word "field" in English, but is used in the surnames of the main cast of *Sailor Moon* as a pun due to sounding exactly like the Japanese particle "no" (meaning "of"), written like this: の

水野

Together as a compound, this word reads as "mizuno", with the literal meaning "water field". However, taking the pun of the "no" character into account, the reader is supposed to understand that the translation can also mean "of water". So far, so good. This is the easy part of the translation, especially since "Mizuno" is a fairly common last name in Japan.

亜

And here's where translating Ami's name becomes problematic. This is going to shock a lot of people, but here's the truth: **there is no translation for this character in English by itself.**

This kanji is only found in compound form with other characters. For example, it appears commonly in the pre-World War II vocabulary for the following geographical locations – **Asia**: 亜細亜, **Arabia**: 亜拉毘亜 and **Russia**: 露西亜 (all typically written in Katakana these days). In fact, the only stand-alone meaning you can get from this kanji is that it is representative of the “a” sound in Japanese, in certain words. By itself it has no meaning. If you look in a Japanese dictionary, you’ll also see it appear in words for chemical compounds or elements, like zinc, iron, and arsenite. (In fact, 亜 is often used to represent the suffix **-ite** in chemistry! Cool huh?)

Here’s where most people get confused. They see this character in the word for “Asia”, and assume that this character is just an abbreviation for that word. It isn’t. The character does appear in compound words that mention Asia (such as 欧亜, “Europe and Asia”), but it **isn’t a stand-alone abbreviation**. So when people tell you that her name has anything to do with the word “Asia”, they’re already a little lost.

Another use of the character above is used for the prefix “sub” – found in compounds for words like 亜こん棒状の (subclavate) and 亜せん妄 (subdelirium). A lot of fans have thus speculated that the intended reading of the 亜 character is to refer to its usage in medical terminology. The saying goes that because Ami is the second girl we see in the manga to become a sailor soldier, she is the “secondary” or “sub” character and so her name reflects this.

The name “Ami” is fairly common in Japan, and **it isn’t only given to girls who are younger sisters or “secondary” children**. Essentially, I don’t think the kanji used in the first part of “Ami” is meant to signify that Sailor Mercury has a “secondary” status.

Since neither the “sub” translation theory nor the “Asia” translation theory hold any water, we must disregard them. That means we are to take the kanji 亜 at face value by how it is used in colloquial Japanese, as a first name; which means that the kanji itself has no meaning other than to indicate how you pronounce it - as “a”.

美

Lastly we have this kanji, pronounced as “mi” or “bi” depending on the compound it’s in. This character means beauty. It is commonly found in Japanese girl’s names. No mystery to bust here; let’s move on!

So what should Mizuno Ami be translated as?

Personally, I don’t think it’s usually appropriate to translate Japanese names into English. Often times the meanings of the individual kanji have little to do with the modern use of the name.

For example, let’s look at the English name **Abigail**. Technically, if you research the etymology, it’s originally a Hebrew word meaning “**my father is joy**”. This fact has little to do with the name’s popular usage in modern day America, and you can bet that most Abigails in the world have no idea about the full etymological implications of their name. The history is almost irrelevant. What counts, when explaining to foreign readers a novel with a character named “Abigail”, is that “Abigail” is a popular English language girls’ first name.

There is such thing as looking too far for meaning in a name, and people who want full translations of character names often end up doing so.

“Mizuno”, with its “of water” pun, is supposed to be a light-hearted reference to the fact that she transforms into Sailor Mercury. As I mentioned earlier, the 水 character can be pronounced either as “mizu” or “sui”. The word for the planet Mercury is 水星 – pronounced *suisei*. This just adds another layer to the joke. There’s no hidden meaning beyond that.

But can’t Ami’s name be translated as “friend” since it’s French?

Even if Ami’s name were intended to be French, the word “ami” is the masculine form. As our Ms. Mizuno is female, her name would be written with the feminine form of the word: “amie”.

Even ignoring the noun gender problem in the French name theory, Ms. Mizuno’s name is written with kanji. This clearly lets the reader know that her name is of Japanese origin. Words that are taken from other languages (like *amie*) are almost always written in katakana. As Ami’s name is not written in katakana, we can pretty safely say it’s not French.

(Incidentally, did you know that the creator of Sailor Moon, Naoko Takeuchi, once published a short story called “Rain Kiss” in a Japanese shoujo manga monthly magazine called “Amie”? True story – it appeared in Amie’s March 1997 issue!)

Foreign Vocab:

kanji (also referred to as “characters”)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanji>

katakana

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katakana>