

ELECTRONIC LITERATURE LANGUAGE THROUGH THE NOVEL *TRAIN MAN* BY HITORI NAKANO

NGÔN NGỮ VĂN HỌC MẠNG QUA TIỂU THUYẾT *ANH CHÀNG XE ĐIỆN* CỦA HITORI NAKANO

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Abstract - Electronic literature was born in the digital age, where the internet is the line connecting the work with the reader, and vice versa, the reader impacts the work, controlling the author's creative authority. The language of electronic literature is an open structure; it is not fixed, eternally one-way like traditional literature, but is specially structured and exists thanks to technology and the consciousness of the writer as well as the interaction from the reader. Hitori Nakano's *Train Man* is a successful electronic literary phenomenon of Japan. This work meets all the "digitalization" criteria typical of the online creative platform. This article wants to point out the role of electronic language in creating and structuring an electronic literary text; specifically, here is through Hitori Nakano's *Train Man* - a novel that was directly textualized from a Japanese online forum.

Key words - Electronic literature; language; symbols; postmodern; *Train Man*

1. Introduction

Modern life is a "flat world" (as termed by Thomas L. Friedman), where technology and the internet reign supreme, governing all aspects of human interaction with the world. The 21st century is the era of digital technology, wherein humans exist and are shaped by a networked world; they are both influenced by and dependent on the "social networks" they themselves have created.

The two numbers, 0 and 1, in computer programming languages have established a new linguistic paradigm - the binary language. "It can be said that with the binary language, the totalitarian power of traditional arts has come to an end, with literature being among the first victims; literary works have been transformed, or at least fundamentally altered in their essence" [1, p.91]. As a result, from within the binary language, literature has evolved to give rise to a new literary form - network literature.

Electronic literature emerged as an inevitable product of modern life, enabling literature to integrate into the flow of postmodern literary trends in particular, and modern technology in general. "Knowledge in the postmodern atmosphere is highly democratic and autonomous; without it, no literary work, no matter how unique or valuable, can survive" [2, p.315]. The advent of electronic literature has completely altered the operation of traditional literature, as the author's role is no longer that of an "omnipotent being"

Tóm tắt - Văn học mạng ra đời trong thời đại công nghệ số, nơi internet là đường dây kết nối tác phẩm với người đọc, và ngược lại, người đọc tác động trở lại tác phẩm, chi phối quyền uy sáng tạo của tác giả. Ngôn ngữ văn học mạng là một kết cấu mở, không cố định, vĩnh cửu một chiều như văn học truyền thống, mà được cấu tạo và tồn tại đặc biệt nhờ vào công nghệ và ý thức của người viết cũng như sự tương tác từ người đọc. *Anh chàng Xe điện* của Hitori Nakano là một hiện tượng văn học mạng thành công của Nhật Bản. Tác phẩm đáp ứng toàn bộ các tiêu chí "số hoá" đặc trưng của nền tảng sáng tạo mạng. Bài viết mong muốn chỉ ra vai trò của ngôn ngữ mạng trong việc sáng tạo và cấu trúc một văn bản văn học mạng; cụ thể ở đây, là thông qua tác phẩm *Anh chàng xe điện* của Hitori Nakano - một cuốn tiểu thuyết đã được văn bản hoá trực tiếp từ một trang diễn đàn mạng tại Nhật Bản.

Từ khóa - Văn học mạng; ngôn ngữ; ký hiệu; hậu hiện đại; *Anh chàng Xe điện*

who determines the existence of a work. The openness of the online environment transforms readers into "co-creators" with the author, and works of online literature are no longer immutable products, but rather vibrant entities animated by comments in various versions. Consequently, the language of electronic literature possesses distinct characteristics, fundamentally different from that of traditional literature. Although *Train Man* was published quite some time ago (in 2004 in Japan and translated and published in Vietnam in 2011), it remains the only work that fully embodies the most common features of electronic literary language and is considered the "origin of the beginning" for this literary form. Therefore, studying the language of electronic literature through Hitori Nakano's *Train Man* will help outline the landscape of network literature as well as the dual role of the reader as a co-creator in the formation of an electronic literary work. By applying the theories of electronic literature, poetics, and analytical and synthetic methods, this article delves into representative aspects of the language of electronic literature in *Train Man*, such as: web links, icons, pictorially structured symbols, and pictorial drawings constructed from network characters.

2. *Train Man* - from online forum to literary and artistic phenomenon

Train Man (Japanese: Densha Otoko) is a quintessential work of electronic literature in the truest

sense of the term. Although it was published relatively early in Japan (2004), the work left a profound mark with its unique poetics structure, establishing itself as a paradigmatic example of network literature, unmatched to this day. Immediately after publication, the novel became a literary phenomenon in Japan, surpassing traditional works and achieving bestseller status for several consecutive weeks. In the first two months of release, over 500,000 copies were sold. The love story of a true otaku - Train Man - and a beautiful girl with the nickname Hermes captivated thousands of readers, and was adapted into four manga versions, as well as both a film and a television series, both of which received continuous acclaim from audiences. The television adaptation, *Densha Otoko*, won “six awards at the Television Drama Academy Awards - the most prestigious television awards system in Japan - including Best Drama and Best Opening” [4].

Train Man was not only successful in Japan but also received warmly in many countries around the world. The Vietnamese translation, published in 2011 with 474 pages, is written in the form of dialogic language. In essence, *Train Man* is not a printed text with the “characteristics of a novel,” but rather a condensed thread from an online forum named 2channel, spanning 57 days (from March 14 to May 16, 2004) and comprising 29,862 comments - continuous dialogues between the nickname Train Man and the broader online community of 2channel. The dialogic field of the novel revolves around Train Man’s romantic relationship with Hermes, featuring conversations and advice from forum members directed at Train Man. According to M. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, every utterance emerges in response to another utterance; thus, the 29,862 comments collectively form a new dialogic landscape. These comments were condensed into 1,919 continuous “posts,” forming the novel *Train Man*. The book was published by Shinchosha Publishing Co., with permission from 2channel. However, no individual holds copyright over this book among the countless anonymous nicknames, including Train Man. The publisher chose the author’s name, Hitori Nakano, as a play on words, referring to the online community as “single people gathering on an Internet forum.” No one has verified which comment belongs to whom, and none of the countless anonymous nicknames received royalties.

Train Man is a true fairy tale amidst the hustle and bustle of modern life, where lonely individuals find common ground in the online world. Who are they? They are anonymous nicknames who find each other on a forum, sharing and helping one another overcome loneliness in everyday life. Postmodern individuals, accustomed to communicating via social networks, chat, and email, face the harsh reality of losing their sense of self, turning their souls into fortresses of loneliness. The habit of hiding behind avatars and edited images gradually erodes their sense of reality and basic social communication skills. Netizens can be anyone, from any background, working in various professions; among them are many otaku, like Train Man. The most interesting aspect of this book is that Train Man’s happiness becomes the collective happiness

of the entire forum. In these strangers, they see in Train Man a sense of empathy, as his dream is also the dream of most of them. They voluntarily help Train Man overcome his inferiority complex, bridging the wide gap between an otaku and a beautiful, wealthy girl, in pursuit of happiness.


3. Multimedia language in the Novel *Train Man*

Train Man is a novel that has been “adapted and transformed” entirely from a digital platform to print, meaning it is a text written entirely in network language. On the surface, *Train Man* still retains the traditional written language of literature, which continues to play an important role in conveying the layers of meaning within the work. However, beyond these essential forms of language, it is the non-traditional (non-verbal) forms present in the work that merit attention, offering a new perspective on postmodern literature from the vantage point of the internet. Here, we use the term “non-traditional language” to refer to the dense system of symbols in the work, which may be temporarily called multimedia language forms that appear exclusively in electronic literature. When these forms are incorporated into a traditional printed literary text, their capacity and functional potential are not fully realized; yet, when placed on a computer screen connected to the internet, these “non-traditional language” forms act as a magical pouch, akin to Doraemon’s, unlocking countless possibilities. Traditional language in print texts is a fixed, immutable material shell, tasked with conveying the author’s message through the reader’s process of information filtering and imagination. In network literature, non-traditional language moves through symbols encoded by the binary system of computers and the internet, enabling readers to swiftly “tunnel” to other interfaces or content via hidden algorithms. Thus, although the form may remain traditional, the characters themselves are encoded as symbols, icons, hyperlinks, and other elements of multimedia language. The power of the internet allows electronic literature to access “magical drawers” (like Doraemon’s) leading to diverse realms of imagery, information, and culture, instantly and even infinitely expanding the scope of literary reflection - something traditional literature, no matter how ambitious, cannot achieve.

In the Vietnamese translation of *Train Man* [3], alongside traditional written language, readers encounter a multitude of different symbols, each serving distinct meanings and functions. Due to limitations in expressive means, we can only summarize a few illustrative symbols in the following table.

Table 1. Multimedia language in the novel *Train man*

No.	Type	Meaning	Example
1	Website links	Create transfer points connecting 2channel forum to other websites for supplementary information, illustration, or practical guidance.	http://www.oxiare.com [3, p.58] (A member recommends a fashion website to Train Man)

2	Icons	Express emotions simply, enlivening the text.	☺ [3, p.44]
3	Pictorially structured symbols	Express emotions simply, enlivening the text. (The end of the novel contains an appendix explaining these symbols.)	(‘A’) [3, p.100]
4	Pictorial drawings constructed from network characters	Express emotions in a complex, powerful, and sudden manner. Unlike types 2 and 3, this form often occupies an entire comment, replacing written language entirely.	 [3, p.367] (See also in the English translation of <i>Train Man</i>)

Based on the table above, we can observe the novel’s innovative linguistic poetics, forming a system of symbols that postmodern readers must decode.

3.1. Website links

Website links are a distinctive sign system of network language, absent from any traditional literary text. In a traditional format, a link is merely a string of meaningless characters, indecipherable to the reader. Yet, when displayed on a computer screen with internet access, these seemingly meaningless strings become wondrously useful in the digital world. These winding links, which might appear nonsensical in the real world, allow us to “tunnel” into another virtual space - a non-geographical domain governed by ever-changing websites.

Train Man was formed on the computer screen, the domain of websites. The 2channel forum itself is a website with numerous connections, and the ongoing dialogues within the forum are closely linked to the world of other web links, including those related to film, music, legends, dining venues, culinary information, and more. These links act like magic, enabling anonymous nicknames to quickly find useful information, shortening time and erasing geographical boundaries.

Website links shape the face of the digital world - a realm characterized by dynamism and sensitivity with each mouse click and keystroke. In real life, to travel to a new place, one must use vehicles such as airplanes, trains, ships, or cars; in the digital (networked) world, these are replaced by website links. Each new domain in cyberspace corresponds to the space of a website, and each website has its own unique link. No two links are identical, as there cannot be two keys for one lock, nor can a website have two identical links.

From a single main link, dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of connected links can be generated, depending on the scope and scale of the website. Thus, the digital world is a world of website links - an endless web of intertextuality, overlapping and innumerable. Information becomes limitless, and the borders of knowledge extend beyond human control via the universe of links. Compared

to traditional literature, electronic literature reflects intertextuality more easily and without limitation. Texts need not be on the same page; they are condensed into strings of encoded characters leading to another website - another text. The internet becomes Harry Potter’s magic wand, transforming every link into a miraculous doorway to new lands of information for users.

In *Train Man*, links appear throughout the novel, connecting the 2channel forum to the wider digital world. Through these links, Train Man and other anonymous nicknames easily find support and assistance. Each link leads to a new website, providing new information quickly and conveniently, unlike the complexities of real life. This illustrates the convenience of cyberspace, where, with just an internet-connected computer, one can instantly travel and experience a variety of services efficiently and economically. Train Man received numerous suggestions and introductions from the 2channel community, ranging from date locations to trendy clothing shops, beauty salons, and even sensitive life issues - all delivered as website links for Train Man to easily consult and make informed decisions.

However, alongside convenience and speed, the abundance of suggestions and links can render the online environment chaotic. Each link opens a different website, some with useful information, others irrelevant or duplicate. Thus, modern individuals face challenges in selecting accurate information. The nickname Train Man in the novel, too, sometimes hesitated amid the advice and guidance from other anonymous forum members, unsure which direction to follow. Fortunately, he eventually chose the right path and won over Hermes.

In summary, website links constitute a typical, distinctive sign system of network language. Their “indirect linguistic” nature possesses a magical and nearly limitless capacity beyond other language forms. The world becomes small when condensed into website links; and humans become giants - capable of holding the world in their hands.

3.2. Icons and pictorially structured symbols

Icons and pictorially structured symbols form an extremely rich, novel, and unique system of signs within the linguistic framework of electronic literature.

First, icons are a characteristic sign system of network language. The icons used in *Train Man* are typical, encapsulating the essence of network language in general and electronic literature in particular. From meaningless characters, people have creatively transformed them into pictorial symbols with emblematic value, indirectly expressing attitudes and emotions in place of traditional spoken and written language.

The system of icons is highly diverse and widely used by chatters, bloggers, and others in digital communication spaces. It is remarkable that meaningless computer characters can morph into faces with a full range of human emotions (emoticons), just like in real life. Furthermore, these icons can be upgraded into animated symbols, flexibly expressing human “emotions” and enlivening network language.

In our view, the icon system is a fascinating invention, enabling people to express emotions more openly and creating vibrancy in a “digital world” where individuals are merely anonymous nicknames, separated by countless visible and invisible boundaries.

Due to limitations in expressive means, we can only extract a few icons such as: 😊 (smiling face); 😞 (sad face); 😠 (tense face); 😜 (winking face); 😎 (cool face); 😊 (cute face);... There are many ways to create these icons on digital platforms. The most common and quickest method is typing a sequence of special characters, which are coded to form an icon (e.g., 😊 is coded as “:” + “:”). Alternatively, if chatters cannot remember the icon codes, they can insert pre-existing icon images from the chat box by simply clicking on the desired icon.

Another type of symbol, also constructed from meaningless characters like icons, is the pictorially structured symbol. These are sequences of unrelated characters arranged side by side to form a specific pattern, conventionally recognized by an online community, specifically here the 2channel community. In essence, this type of character is a distinct sign system of the online community, emblematic and used to simply express emotions and enliven the text. This form is prevalent on online forums like 2channel and is characteristic of a “non-traditional language” form unique to the digital platform.

With pictorially structured symbols, individuals directly express emotions by connecting meaningless characters to form eyes, actions, etc. The characters are not transformed into faces or symbols like icons; they remain as they are, arranged to create a desired form. In *Train Man*, anonymous nicknames combine characters to create expressive icons, replacing lengthy statements - each icon conveying a different meaning. For example:

a. (^_^)/ [3, p.473]: means “HELLO!” → replacing a greeting in the chat box.

b. (-.-)zzZ [3, p.474]: means “Sleeping now” → replacing a goodnight message.

The juxtaposition of characters allows us to visualize and imagine faces, eyes, emotions, or actions, providing insight into the mood or intent of the user.

Icons and pictorially structured symbols contribute to the vibrancy of network language, reflecting the playfulness and mischievousness of youth. These whimsical symbols and images demonstrate the boundless creativity and desire for emotional expression inherent in humans. This desire transforms the seemingly impossible into reality, animating otherwise lifeless characters. Thus, while “digitized,” the language remains highly “humanized”; icons and pictorially structured symbols enable individuals to indirectly release their emotions via the computer screen.

3.3. Pictorial drawings constructed from network characters

Pictorial drawings constructed from network characters are a highly distinctive “non-traditional language” form in

Train Man. These drawings are created by combining network characters, animated by the creativity of chatters, making them lively and meaningful. A pictorial drawing can convey complex emotions, surpassing even icons and pictorially structured symbols in expressive power.

In *Train Man*, such drawings appear frequently, often occupying an entire comment without requiring any explanation in traditional written language; they create a fascinating, novel, and unique dimension to the text. Not to mention the dynamic drawings, whose liveliness can only be fully appreciated when viewed on a computer screen - revealing the magic of a digital world that might otherwise seem cold and impersonal.

While also constructed by combining network characters, unlike icons or pictorially structured symbols, these drawings require significant effort and investment from chatters and bloggers. Creating a pictorial drawing from network characters demands patience, creativity, scientific thinking, and proficiency in computer and information technology. These vivid, character-based drawings simulate real-life scenes while retaining the distinct and whimsical flavor of the online world. Although the drawings often do not precisely resemble real objects or phenomena, as they are products of imagination, they are enthusiastically embraced on online forums. Each drawing embodies the creator’s dedication, conveying interesting messages and, above all, releasing the joy of “netizens.” Chatters create these drawings and share them widely across forums and websites, allowing everyone to use them in digital communication. Thus, while it is not easy to create such drawings, it is not difficult to possess many of them. This is a highlight of computers and the internet, where complexity is simplified with just the press of the enter key. Some pictorial drawings constructed from network characters in *Train Man* include:

80 Name: Anonymous Date of posing: 09/05/2004 08:10

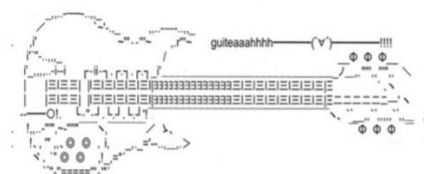


Figure 1. Guitar [3, p.362]

129 Name: Anonymous Date of posing: 09/05/2004 08:13



Figure 2. Soldier [3, p.371]

With pictorial drawings constructed from network characters, people have found a new means of expressing emotions - without words or actions, but indirectly through images. As a result, the digital world becomes increasingly rich and connected to real life, closely aligned with human psychology. In *Train Man*, such drawings appear repeatedly throughout Train Man's journey for help, up until he wins Hermes's heart. Every milestone in Train Man's escape from bachelorhood is accompanied by a series of pictorial drawings expressing and sharing emotions with him. These drawings reflect the joy and excitement of the online community for Train Man and Hermes's love story. At times, these emotions are so overwhelming that words fail, and only pictorial drawings can convey and merge with the collective happiness of the forum. One can only fully appreciate the outpouring of emotion by looking at the computer screen and witnessing the continuous appearance of these drawings; at that moment, the anonymous nicknames on 2channel seem to find the joy of victory, as if they are sharing, embracing, and laughing and crying together among thousands of strangers. The authenticity brought by pictorial drawings constructed from network characters surpasses even that of real-life encounters. Thus, what is virtual becomes real; through the special sign system of network language, we witness the beauty of human connection and genuine emotion.

4. Conclusion

Life has become increasingly multifaceted with the flow of technology and the internet. The face of the world changes day by day, developing and creating new social biospheres within social networks. Human needs have thus grown alongside the times. People yearn to come closer together in the "global village" (as Marshall McLuhan described in *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*), and the world is now

more within human reach than ever before. The emergence of electronic literature is an inevitable trend of modern humanity, effectively guiding literature toward a postmodern paradigm. The limitless connectivity of the internet has blurred the boundaries between reader and writer, enhancing empathy and co-creative capacities among individuals.

The novel *Train Man* successfully demonstrates the creative achievements of collective literary production on the network platform, thanks to the multimedia language system of the internet. It can be said that the dense system of symbols used in the work has created a distinctive identity for *Train Man*. Through the creative generation of these symbols, electronic literature has established a unique literary form with its own discourse - what we may temporarily call the "image-word discourse" - representative of the sensibility and consciousness of postmodern individuals. Through these symbols, each recipient truly communicates and shares the necessary content with others. They resemble archetypes, as theorized by C.G. Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious" - if such a comparison can be made.

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