

SOME NOTES ON TRANSLATION — From Japanese into English —

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Introduction

Language is without doubt cultural in nature and determination. This is true whether one believes, with some, that language must be distinguished from culture, or, with others, that language is one major aspect of culture and hence it is to be included in culture.¹

In this connection Sapir states as follows:

Language is becoming increasingly valuable as a guide to the scientific study of a given culture. In a sense, the network of cultural patterns of a civilization is indexed in the language, which expresses that civilization. It is an illusion to think that we can understand the significant outlines of a culture through sheer observation and without the guide of the linguistic symbols which makes these outlines significant and intelligible to society.

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.

The understanding of a simple poem, for instance, involves not merely an understanding of the single words in their average significance, but a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words or as it is suggested by their overtones.

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.²

Harry Hoijer is right when he says: "And to the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, so should we expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication understanding. Intercultural communication, however wide the difference between cultures may be, is not impossible. It is simply more or less difficult, depending on the degree of difference between the cultures concerned."³

It is oftentimes said that to translate from one language into another, strictly speaking, is impossible, in spite of Hoijer's statement. We know this is true by experience. Nevertheless, a large number of translations are being produced every day. In Japan, for instance, almost everything, no matter in what language it may be originally written, is available in Japanese translation. However, there may be "significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural understanding" in those translations. In the case of literary appreciation, it is necessary that we gain a full comprehension of the whole life of a community as it is mirrored in the words of a given literary work and as it is suggested by their overtones, as Sapir put it.

Many Japanese novels are now available in English translation. It is evident, however, that the English speaking reader will confront a considerable amount of difficulty in obtaining a complete picture that a given Japanese novel intends to present without his or her knowledge of the Japanese cultural traits.

To translate from Japanese into English, or vice versa, always involves much circumlocution, since what is easy to express in one language, by virtue of its lexical and grammatical techniques, is often difficult to phrase in the other.⁴ In order to demonstrate this commonplace principle, I compared a Japanese novel with its English translation in the hope of finding how much of the original information was lost or how much information was added to the original in the process of translation.

I chose a novel entitled *The Sound of Waves* by Yukio Mishima. It was published in 1954 under the title of *Shiosai*.⁵ In 1956 it was translated into English by Meredith Weatherby.⁶

The Sound of Waves is a story of first love. The scene is a Japanese fishing village, where the air is rich with the salty tang of the sea. The modern world is far away. Nevertheless, it is a universal story that might have happened anywhere. It begins when a boy, shinji, falls in love with a girl, Hatsue. The life of a Japanese fishing village is still very strict. Overcoming all kinds of difficulties the young man can happily marry the girl. Mishima's writing with simplicity, delicacy, and restrained lyricism fascinates the reader. But whether or not this story appeals to the English speaking reader depends largely on its translation, to say nothing of the content of the original.

I read with care both the Japanese and English versions, word by word and sentence by sentence, and then compared the two in terms of lexical and semantic differences.

Loss of Information

Generally speaking, there is no information loss in this specific translation. However, I found a few items which had failed to convey their full meaning. I would like to emphasize that the English translation is amazingly accurate. And as one American reader of the novel has said, it is so readable.

(a) is a Japanese word, (b) its English translation, and (c) my comments:

1. (a) ri

(b) under three miles

(c) "ri" is a Japanese unit of distance (2.44 miles). Naturally the translation is correct. The term, however, is old-fashioned in Japan, but it is still widely used, especially among elderly persons in the country. It is only natural that this novel should use the term. But "ri" could have been translated into other word, for instance, "league," which is frequently found in Hawthorne's stories.

2. (a) hirame

(b) a fish

(c) The word “hirame” means a flatfish, a halibut and the like. As snow is important to Eskimos, so is fish to the Japanese. Many kinds of fishes are well known to the Japanese, especially to those who are responsible for cooking. In my corpus the word “hirame” occurs three times. The translator simply refers to it as a “fish.” He should have specified the fish, since the novel itself is concerned with a fishing village and the fish plays an important role in the story. However, from the point of view of the English speaking reader, the translation as it is may be perfectly all right.

3. (a) gunte

(b) work-gloves

(c) The word literally means army gloves. It is one of the words which constantly reminds us of the Japanese militarism. There are a series of words which begin with “gun” meaning “war, army, military, etc.” But most of them have stopped being used since the end of the war. “Gunte” is still being used, especially among the working-class. From the translation, “work-gloves,” you can hardly notice that it is related to army. This does not mean that I object to the translation, for there is no other way of putting this into English. However, this is one of the examples to indicate that translation cannot cover all the implied meanings, or connotation of such a simple word as this.

4. (a) torii

(b) torii

(c) The original meaning of “torii” was an arch-shaped perch on which the cocks offered to the shrine rested. “Torii” in Kanji or Chinese characters is suggestive of this original meaning. Hence it has become the symbol of the entrance to a Shinto shrine. And the word has been adopted into English as a loan word.⁷

Addition of Information

1. (a) Utajima (a place-name)

(b) Utajima – Song Island

(c) “Utajima” literally means a song island, since “uta” represents a song and “jima or shima” does an island. It is known that Japanese uses a logographic writing system along with a syllabic writing system. The translation does not mean anything, unless you know the writing system of Japanese. But I think it is an interesting device.

2. (a) mada matsu no midori wa asai
still pine tree of green dull (is)

(b) Just now the needles of the surrounding pine trees are still dull-green from winter.

(c) The translation has “just now the needles of the surrounding” and “from winter” which are not to be found in the original. Probably “The pine trees are still dull-green” does not make sense in English. Nevertheless, this additional information can be pointed out.

3. (a) Watatsumi-no-Mikoto (a proper name of a deity)

(b) Watatsumi-no-Mikoto, god of the sea

(c) This additional explanation, “god of the sea,” is as pertinent as the above 2.

4. (a) xxxxx

(b) as a matter of fact; only

(c) These items are not to be found in the original. I believe that they could have been eliminated from the translation. Yukio Mishima, the author of the novel, seems to have endeavored to make his writing as simple as possible, which is indicative of Hemingway’s style. The translator may have inserted them into the English version for the sake of “euphony.”

5. (a) “Kubo-san ga o-sakana o”

(b) “Kubo-san has brought us a fish.”

In my small corpus, the following English loan words were found: copy, engine, winch, bouy, roller-shaft, slip, aluminium, towel, jumper, socks, serge, sweater, pipe, tank, rope, ship, ton, bridge, pocket, calendar, radio.

All these loan words are written in *Katakana* to indicate that they have been borrowed from outside. Of these words only “slip” plus suffix is used as a verb in the novel. The word “aluminium” is clipped into “alumi” in Japanese. Like this example there are many loan words which are clipped—the omission of syllables from the beginning or end of a word. As far as this novel is concerned the English loan words seem to have been useful to the translator, since they have not changed in meaning. Usually loan words very rapidly change in meaning.

Notes

1. John B. Carroll, *The Study of Language*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1955, p. 112.
2. Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality, Selected Essays*, ed. by David G. Mandelbaum, University of California Press, 1956, pp. 68-69.
3. Harry Hoijer, “The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” in *Language and Culture*, ed. by H. Hoijer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1954, p. 94.
4. Hoijer, P. 95.
5. Yukio Mishima, *Shiosai*, Tokyo, Shinchosha, 1954, pp. 240.
6. Yukio Mishiam, *The Sound of Waves*, translated by Meredith Weatherby, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1956, pp. 183.
7. OED-2 defines the word as follows: “A ceremonial gateway in front of a Japanese Shinto Shrine, consisting of two uprights and two crosspieces of which the lower is straight and the upper usu. curved and projecting,” Its first citation (1927) is “At the entry of the walk, which leads to the temple, stands ... a particular fashioned gate, called *Troij*, and built either of stone or wood.” Its most recent citation (1977)

is “Mills ... must be almost as exotic to most younger Americans as torii [notice no underline] or dagobas.”