Translating by the Seat of Your Pants: Some Observations about the Difficulties of Translation and How to Deal with Them

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

Editor's Note: We are pleased to publish this paper – the winning entry in the 1984 Essay Contest sponsored by the Crypto-Linguistic Association. Although written from the perspective of Japanese translation, the paper will be of interest to linguists and language analysts in general and, in many cases, to those in other cryptologic disciplines.

Each language is unique, so translation from or into it poses unique problems. But there are common problems which beset translation in general, so examining the problems of translating one language can help translators of other languages. The following observations are provided from the perspective of Japanese translation in the hope that they might be helpful to translators and others alike, and demonstrate the interesting and challenging nature of the translator's job.

1. The Cultural Milieu: The Importance of Learning Well the Language Being Translated

It is often said that understanding the culture of a country is important for understanding what the people of that country are saying or writing. In practice, however, the fact that the language of a people is rooted in its own culture may be forgotten. Without a knowledge of Japanese culture, for example, expressions such as *Mazushiki o urezu hitoshikarazaru o ureu* ("Don't fear poverty; only fear not being equal"),[1] *shakaijin* (a " bona fide member of society,")[2] or *Teishu wa joobu de rusu ga yoi* ("A good husband is one who is healthy and stays away from home a lot") make little sense. But if one knows that the Japanese company, like Japanese society, is group-oriented and advancement goes by seniority until a certain point, the first expression makes more sense. Knowing that one is considered to be an adult in Japanese society only after joining a firm or becoming married makes *shakaijin* more understandable. And realizing that Japanese housewives feel that if their husbands are away from home a lot at night, it means they are probably spending time with their co-workers which, in turn, will help with their careers, removes the mystery from the third expression.

[1] Osamu Mizutani, *Japanese: The Spoken Language in Japanese Life* (Tokyo: Shogakusha, 1979).

[2] George Fields, *From Bonsai to Levis* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 63ff.

Approved for release by NSA on 12-01-2011, Transparency Case# 63852

Japanese culture stresses the importance of group harmony and harmonious relations between groups. So the Japanese language allows for speakers to express themselves indirectly so as to avoid embarrassment if their ideas are later proven incorrect and to avoid hurting others' feelings. (See the "*no dewa nai ka*," "*no dewa aru mai ka*," and "*It would seem that*" expressions in section 6.)

One example of how knowing the culture may help in translation is provided by the expression *seishinron* (literally, "the mental argument"). Japanese culture retains heavy emphasis on self-development and self-discipline as virtues to be cultivated. The *yareba-yaru* ("can-do"), mind-over-matter spirit is often heard of in Japan. It is known as the *seishin bannooron* ("attitude is everything"). Knowing that, one can translate *seishinron* not as the "mental argument" but as – depending on the context – "You can do it if only you put your mind to it." The *seishinron* is the contention of the Japanese that foreign businessmen can sell successfully on the Japanese market if they only try hard enough to do so.

Similarly, a knowledge of the history of a country can prove invaluable in understanding expressions derived from a country's past. Thus, in English we have the expression "I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree," and in Japanese there are expressions like *sekigahara*[3] (a showdown between two rival business firms) and *Osaka fuyu no jin* (the winter siege of Osaka) and *sotobori o umete honmaru wo otosu* (to bring about the fall of the castle by filling in the outer moats), expressions taken from famous Japanese battles.

In order to understand the last expression, for example, one must know that in 1614 Tokugawa Ieyasu, attempting to wrest control of all Japan, besieged Toyotomi Hideyori in his castle in Osaka. He first laid siege to the castle in winter (hence the second expression). Toyotomi filled in the outer moats at Tokugawa Ieyasu's request as a prerequisite for signing a truce with Tokugawa. The latter, however, kept making demands upon Toyotomi, who in turn finally realized that, no matter how he tried to please his opponent, Tokugawa Ieyasu had no intention of being placated. The battle resumed, and Toyotomi was defeated and killed. If "the castle will fall if one lets its outer moats be filled in," the lesson to be learned is that one should defend in depth and not even let one's outermost defenses be breached, since any substantive concession at all (such as in Japan's trade negotiations with the U.S. aimed at opening up the Japanese market) will ultimately lead to total defeat as in the case of Toyotomi Hideyori. The winter siege of Osaka Castle alludes to Tokugawa Ieyasu's strategy of encircling and starving out his opponent. In the business world, that translates to isolating a competitor from customers and sources of support, sometimes by pricing, sometimes by other means. "*Osaka fuyu no jin*" can therefore mean "(We're) done for!"

[3] Mitsubishi Corporation, *A Japanese Business Glossary* (Tokyo:Toyokeizaishinposha, 1983), p. 152.

2. Keeping in Mind the Sound System of a Language Can Help in Understanding Foreign Terms Transliterated into That Language

The term *gettsuu* appeared in an article on baseball but not in dictionaries. Similarly the expression *konpuutatsuuru* appeared in a brochure on a new Japanese supercomputer system. In both cases the translator was baffled because he did not realize at first that Japanese has no equivalent for the English sound "to" – it has to be transliterated in Japanese as *tsu*. Knowing that, one can see that *gettsuu* means "get two," i.e., a double play, and that *konpuutatsuuru* means "computer tools" (general-purpose software programs). Understanding the latter expression also requires one to know that Japanese has no equivalent for *L*, a sound which must be represented by the Japanese *R* sound, which has no equivalent in English.

A translator looking up a Southeast Asian placename written in Japanese with *ga* as its first syllable found it only after she remembered that Japanese *ga* is sometimes pronounced as if it were written "*nga*."

3. Context and Connotations

In Japanese there is the expression *hi ga miegakure* ("kindling sparks appear and disappear"). If the context depicts ominous developments about to occur, developments about which one has learned from talking to a number of people, one might translate the expression as "(I) catch rumblings". . . . The point here is that a literal transliteration makes no sense, largely because the word "sparks" connotes in English something to do with romance. Only when the word "sparks" is used as a verb, as in "to spark a conflict," does it suggest impending problems.

As translators are more than well aware, making use of the context in which an unknown word is embedded is a vital tool for understanding it. For example, if we know from examples given in a Japanese dictionary that the expression *Nani mo hechima mo nai* ("It is not a loofa dish cloth or anything")[4] is used as a strong negative, we might then be able to translate the sentence *Koogakkoo no shiken benkyoo shinakereba daigakkoo mo nani mo hechima mo nai* ("If you don't study for your high school exams, college will not be a loofa rag or anything") as "If you don't study for your high school exams, you can forget about going to college."

4. The Simplest Explanation of a Term or Expression is Probably the Correct One ("Occam's Razor")

William of Occam once wrote the following dictum: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* ("Entities must not be multiplied

[4] The loofa plant is said to have no uses other than insignificant ones, such as being a dishrag or sponge, hence the negative meaning.

unnecessarily"). Like a good theory in physics, the simplest explanation with the fewest loose ends is probably the right one for a given term or phrase. Consider the famous mistranslation of *mokusatsu suru* at the end of World War II, when the Japanese reaction to the U.S. peace proposal was rendered as to "ignore" or "dismiss with contempt"; the word most logically should have been translated as "to reserve comment" – a bureaucratic device by which officials and diplomats attempt to maintain silence in order to avoid being blamed for not taking any action on something. (There could be other translations of the phrase. Of course, reserving comment is in itself a snub.)

5. Finding the Degree of Emphasis of a Word or Phrase in Written Material Is Important

Unlike listening to someone say something, trying to determine the degree of emphasis of a written word or phrase can be difficult. And that task is made more difficult by the fact that one can often only know the force of a given expression if one has lived a long time in the culture that produced it. Consider, for example, these two expressions in English:

"For Pete's sake!"

and

"For the love of Mike!"

A foreigner might think that they mean about the same thing, but actually they are radically different in emphasis. The first, for example, might be used when one meets someone from the same town while on a trip in a foreign country, and the second when one is trapped by a fallen beam in a burning building and is pleading with someone not to be abandoned to the fire.

In formal written Japanese there are certain particles like *mo* and *shidai de aru* which indicate emphasis, and some words have built-in emphasis like *shozon de aru* ("[We] definitely plan to do [something]"). And usually the context will help to determine the degree of emphasis imparted to a sentence. But there are times when only a native can tell how emphatic a word or phrase is – for example that *niganigashii* means only to "dislike" something and not to "be disgusted" with it.

When an expression is hard-hitting, it should be translated that way. For example, the saying *Yasukaroo warukaroo* (literally, "It may be cheap, but then it will be expensive") could become in English "If you buy cheap, you get cheap."

6. There Is Usually a Reason for the Writer Having Chosen One Word Over Another – Even If It Is Only to Avoid Repetition

That applies to verbs as well as nouns. Compare, for example, the following grammatical endings in Japanese:

- *Omou*: (I) think that . . . (expresses the writer's impressions);

- *Omowareru*: It would seem that . . . ("It is thought that . . ." when it is used before the particle *ga*, which marks the end of a clause as well as the subject of one, among other things);

- *Omoenai*: (I) can't imagine [something happening];

- *Kangaeru*: (I) feel that . . . (a conclusion reached after considerable thought);

- *Kangaerareru*: (My) impression is . . . , (we) could see [e.g., the opposition party winning in the election], it is conceivable that . . . ;

- *(Keiki ga) warukunaru osore ga aru*: (The economy) is liable to grow worse;

- *(Keiki ga) warukunarikanenai*: (The economy) may well grow worse;

- *(Keiki ga) warukunaru no dewa nai ka*: (The economy) may grow worse;

- *(Keiki ga) warukunaru no dewa aru mai ka*: (I) am afraid that (the economy) is going to grow worse.

As one can see, although the above groups of grammatical endings have English translations which are quite close in meaning, they are not the same, so one must exercise care to work the differences of connotation and denotation into the translation. That is to say, the differences in words and grammatical particles cannot be dismissed as just so much useless verbiage.

7. The Dictionary Is Not the Final Arbiter of the Meaning of Words and Expressions

Aside from the fact that many words or expressions are not found in dictionaries for one reason or another (e.g., the term in question is too new, too colloquial, or confined to a narrow geographical area where it is used), dictionaries are not always correct or complete. A common mistake of dictionaries of colloquial phrases, for example, is that they try to force a colloquial expression in one language into one in the translated language. To illustrate, *Modern Colloquialisms: Japanese-English*[5] defines the Japanese expression *Koronbusu no tamago* ("Columbus's egg") as meaning "deceptively simple," and gives this example: *Ano mondai wa masa ni koronbusu no tamago datta. Muzukashisoo ni miedakedo, tomodachi kara setsumei saretemo kantanna koto ga wakatta* ("That's

[5] *Modern Colloquialisms: Japanese-English.* Rev. ed. (Tokyo: Asahi Press, 1977), p. 337.

DOCID: 3928797

truly a case of 'Columbus's egg'; it seemed difficult to me, but once the problem was explained to me by a friend, I saw how simple it really was"). But *Modern Colloquialisms*, by trying to force the expression into a pat phrase in English, or by giving an incomplete definition, misses the real meaning of "Columbus's egg", i.e., it is difficult to discover or do something for the first time, but easy to follow once someone else has blazed the trail.

In this case, in order to learn the correct meaning of the phrase, it is necessary to refer to the more comprehensive *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (Comprehensive Dictionary of the Japanese Language),[6] Volume VIII, which gives the following explanation of the etymology:

> A man said, "All Columbus did to discover land was to keep on sailing west. What's so great about that? Anyone could have done it." Columbus, who had overheard the man, jumped to his feet and, snatching an egg from off his dinner table, said, "Gentlemen, try standing this egg on its end on the dinner table." Everyone tried to do so and, of course, nobody could. At that point Columbus bashed the end of the egg into the table and so had no trouble getting the egg to stand on its end. He said, "Gentlemen, you see how easy it is to do something once someone has done it before."

8. Keeping Current

One can well imagine someone in Japan puzzling over the meaning of the new expression in English: "Where's the beef?" Not everyone in the U.S. knows the expression "yumpies" (the Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals). But we in the U.S. also have trouble with new terms coined from time to time in Japan but not found in dictionaries. For example, the 14 April 1984 edition of the *Nihon Keisai Shinbun* (the Japanese counterpart of the *Wall Street Journal*) had prominently displayed on its front page a political cartoon showing a young man in jeans waving a banner calling for labor to join in the *shuntoo* (the regular drive every spring for higher wages). Also in the cartoon are two young people, both with their backs turned to the first individual and seated in front of computers. The first, a woman, is shown saying "*Nekura*!" ("It's hopeless!") and the second, a man, is shown as shouting "*Dasai*!" (That's passé!"). Neither expression is found in current Japanese dictionaries, and one or both were probably coined this year. (Fortunately, the answers were supplied in an article in a newsletter published in San Francisco, California, by Donald Philippi for translators of scientific Japanese.) The problem is that, unlike his

[6] *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (Tokyo: Kogakusha, 1974), Vol. VIII, p. 463. Japanese are surprised to discover that English speakers are not acquainted with the expression "Columbus's egg." The above-mentioned dictionary of modern Japanese colloquialisms does say that the term doesn't "ring a bell" among English speakers. The *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* explains the reason Japanese speakers are all well aware of *Koronbasu no tamago* (Columbus's egg) is that the story related above about the origin of the expression was incorporated into Volume Eight of the *Standard Elementary School Reader* which was required reading for all Japanese elementary schoolchildren.

counterpart in Japan for whom magazines are published which constantly provide the meanings of new colloquialisms in English, the U.S. translator has almost nowhere to turn for the meaning of Japanese neologisms. The problem might be alleviated if a U.S. government, corporate, or educational entity already in Japan for other purposes could be funded to compile, as an ancillary duty, new Japanese words and phrases and to periodically make them available in pamphlet form through the U.S. Government Printing Office.

9. Translating by the 'Seat of Your Pants'

In the final analysis, translation remains an art rather than a science, and translators are truly on their own when it comes to understanding what someone writing in another language or culture is really saying and conveying it accurately in English. The following words and expressions should give some idea through Japanese-language examples of the craft aspect of translating a language.

Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary renders *iikoto o omoitsuita* ("to think of a good idea") as "I know what. . . ."[7] The Kenkyusha translation, while a bit colloquial, does show that the meaning of an expression or phrase often must be translated indirectly, or even elliptically, for it to be understood or sound natural in English.

Sometimes the meaning of a phrase must be derived inductively from abbreviated forms in a foreign language: *g-pan* ("jeans"), for example, is not in the dictionary but must be guessed from looking at all the dictionary definitions for the meanings of words beginning with *pan* until one comes to the word *pantsu* ("pants"). Similarly, the terms *sara kin* or *sara yamai* ("charging loan-shark high interest rates") are expressions not found in Japanese dictionaries. They are derived from *sarariiman* ("white-collar workers") and *kinyuu* ("loan") or *yamai* ("distress") and refer to the practice of charging white-collar office workers exorbitant interest rates for loans.

So many words are borrowed from English into Japanese that translators tend to automatically assume that loanwords in Japanese are derived from English. That can be a straitjacket to preclude understanding when the *gairaigo* (loanword) comes from other foreign languages. Thus, *shuukuriimu* sounds like it might be "shoe cream," but actually it means a creampuff. (The Japanese word is derived from the French term *chou à la crème*, rather than from English as a native English speaker might expect.

Often translators must use imagination, inference, and analogy to understand and translate a phrase. For example, with a little reflection one can see that the Japanese expression *tokage no shippo kiri* ("the lizard

7 *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1974), p. 1299.

DOCID: 3928797

abandons its tail when caught") means to make a sacrifice in order to survive a difficult situation.

Sometimes it is important to use a term that is less broad in meaning when translated. Taking an example from *Kenkyusha*'s, the word *komaru* means "to be placed in a difficult situation by others' actions." In the sentence *Kimi ni gaishutsu sarete wa komaru* (literally, "Letting you go out would be a problem for me"), *komaru* might best be translated as "I do not want (you to go out)" since it is already understood that the person's going out is a problem for the speaker.

In a real sense, a word only takes on a meaning when used in the context of a sentence, so its translation must be fitted to the sentence in question. For example, the verb *seibi suru* (literally, "to adjust and prepare") becomes "to build and upgrade" in the phrase *infura o seibi suru* ("to provide for the creation and upgrading of infrastructure") and "to outfit" in the phrase *tankensen o seibi suru* ("to outfit ships to search for petroleum and minerals").

The structure of the Japanese language, along with the belief of the Japanese in suggesting things indirectly rather than stating them explicitly, lends itself to expressions which are difficult to translate. For example, Japanese newspaper headlines and lines of poetry often contain the direct object, followed by the particle *o* (also represented as *wo*) which marks the direct object, omitting the verb altogether. To give a hypothetical example, if the rest of the text is deleted after the following sentence in the Japanese syllabary (a system used for enumeration like a., b., c., d., etc., in English) *Irowa nihoedo chirinuru wo* ("the fact that the flowers are beautiful but shed their petals ..."), readers would be free to exercise their imagination and complete the sentence as "the falling petals of the fragrant flowers are so sad that they remind me of how short life really is." Japanese newspaper headlines often do just that. The next sentence in the syllabary does in fact voice a lament along those lines. It reads *Wagayo tarezo tsunenaran* ("Who could hope to live forever?")

CONCLUSIONS

Translation can be a very difficult undertaking and, as one can see from the material presented above, one must exercise great care in order to be able to convey the original meaning of the writer in a foreign language. But there is also a great sense of satisfaction which comes from understanding what someone is saying in another language and contributing, through translation, to the process of cross-cultural understanding.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his appreciation to [redacted] Norman Wild, and [redacted] for their helpful comments. Any mistakes, of course, are solely the author's.

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