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On Translation

A short introduction to the Japanese language will illustrate the kind of difficulties one encounters in translating Japanese into the European languages, and vice versa.

Linguistically, Japanese is an isolated language. It has no relation to Chinese. It must have had some relation to Korean, another isolated language, but the two went into different directions thousands of years ago. Some linguists claim that the Japanese language, along with the Korean, belongs to the Ural-Altaic family, yet the claim remains hypothetical.

The Japanese language features some characteristics that would seem most strange to those who are only familiar with the European languages. For example, a grammatical subject is unnecessary in Japanese to construct a grammatically complete sentence. “淋しい” (*Sabishii*) means (someone is) lonely. It is a complete sentence, but there is no subject. The sentence may mean ‘I’m lonely,’ ‘you are lonely,’ ‘he/she is lonely,’ ‘the rock is lonely,’ ‘all human beings are lonely,’ etc, depending on the context. It may furthermore refer to a vague sense of loneliness which needn’t be specified. It is true that in some European languages, such as Italian, a grammatically complete sentence is possible without a named subject. But the subject can always be determined by the inflection of the verb (and often also by the changes in the articles, adjectives and nouns): “*Sono sola*,” “*Sei solo*.” A Japanese sentence may be very long and still be without a subject. *Tale of Genji*, for instance, might contain a sequence of three long sentences without subjects, yet in each a different subject would be implied. It is then for the reader to figure out to whom the sentence refers by the degree in the narrator’s use of the honorifics --which happens to be yet another distinct feature of the Japanese language. The narrator of the *Tale of Genji*, a lady in waiting, would thus reserve the highest honorifics for the Emperor.

In fact, the Japanese language does not even have personal pronouns as the European languages do. No word in Japanese is the equivalent of the English “I”--the most essential personal pronoun in European languages. Instead, Japanese has many variations of the word that means “I”: 私 (*watashi*), あたし (*atashi*), わたくし (*watakushi*), 俺 (*ore*), 僕 (*boku*), 我輩 (*wagabaii*), あたい (*atai*), おいら (*oira*), わらわ (*warawa*), うち (*uchi*), おいどん (*oidon*), 手前 (*temae*), to name just a few. Each connotes a varying degree of culture (or its lack), urbanity and rusticity, femininity and masculinity, or even pompousness and humbleness. As a consequence, a Japanese speaker must use different forms of “I,” each reflecting his

interlocutor. And this floating “I” renders impossible the notion of universal subjectivity implied in the “I” of the European languages.

It is unlikely that Japanese is unique in these linguistic features. More likely, if languages were studied from a less Eurocentric perspective, the very existence of personal pronouns such as “I” might instead emerge as a feature setting the Indo-European languages apart from other families. Indeed, the philosophical notion of the Subject may come to be seen as a linguistic by-product. What is truly unique about the Japanese language, however, is its writing system. To my knowledge it is the only language which mixes ideograms (the Chinese characters) with phonetic signs*— but two different kinds of phonetic signs. Thus, within any Japanese text, three different sign systems coexist. Ideograms are used for nouns and verbs, and may always be replaced with either of the phonetic signs. Of the two phonetic sign systems, the more frequently used sign, *hiragana*, best represents the vernacular language, whereas the other, *katakana*, gives the impression of being more blatantly phonetic, and is thus often reserved for imported foreign words. The word “*bara*,” meaning “rose,” therefore, may be written in three ways: 薔薇、ばら、 or バラ. Thus, the notorious line, “A rose is a rose is a rose,” may be translated:

- A 薔薇 は 薔薇 は 薔薇 である *bara wa bara wa bara dearu*
B ばら は ばら は ばら である *bara wa bara wa bara dearu*
C バラ は バラ は バラ である *bara wa bara wa bara dearu*
Or,
D バラ ハ バラ ハ バラ デアル *bara wa bara wa bara dearu*
Or even,
E 薔薇 は ばら は バラ である *bara wa bara wa bara dearu*

The five translations are all pronounced the same but each gives a very different impression in Japanese, for the meaning and the nuances are inextricably connected to the combination of signs one chooses. For Gertrude Stein I would choose translation B, the one in all *hiragana*, because it is the simplest and yet, the most confounding. In Japanese, the graphic dimension thus strangely tips the acoustic.

This is so for reasons of history. The Japanese did not have a writing system until the Chinese characters were introduced in the fifth or sixth century by Korean scholars who had fled political upheavals in their homeland. Had the Chinese used a phonetic alphabet, the Japanese language would have developed in a very different way. However, that was not the case and, the Japanese, who had to make do with the ideograms from an entirely different language, found ingenious ways to cope with the problem. First, as we have seen, they conceived their own system of writing in a vernacular that mixes Chinese characters with newly created phonetic signs. Second, they developed a complex decoding method of the Chinese texts, systematically changing their word order so as to fit it into the Japanese language. The Chinese

word order in a sentence, 我愛_レ (I love you) was thus systematically converted into Japanese word order, 我は_レを愛する (I you love). This method not only allowed two types of written text to coexist, one in the local vernacular and the other in Chinese; these parallel language structures also allowed the Japanese to basically circumvent the entire problem of translation until the country opened its doors to the West – which finally brings us to the discussion of modern translation to and from the Japanese.

One of the more curious aspects of human beings is our almost innate capacity to distinguish “what is *not* only a story” from “what is only a story,” in a fundamental and literal sense. Philosophy, religion, science (and often poetry) – may all come under the rubric of Truth, because there, the true meaning of the words is, in principle, unalterable. There, one is not allowed to play with the original text -- no free adaptations, no free participation in the imaginings of an other. The only way to transpose those unalterable words into another language is through the act of translation--an act which presupposes precisely that the original text is respected. And we humans have repeatedly attempted to know which writings require us to remain faithful to the true meaning of the text. Conversely, we humans have also always wanted to know which writings are only stories, there to be infinitely altered.

The coexistence of the two types of written text in Japan, the Chinese and the vernacular, meant that the present-day notion of translation did not need to exist here. All the Chinese texts that came under the rubric of Truth (Buddhist sutras, Confucius’ teachings, the Classics) needed no translation because those who read them, the upper-class men, were educated to decipher their meanings in the original. The Chinese prose fiction, however, was freely adapted into the vernacular language. There was no line drawn between getting an inspiration, borrowing a few plot lines, putting a tale into a Japanese context, or translating a story, whether loosely or faithfully.

So, the present-day notion of translating novels-- that is, translating a story in the stance of fundamental respect for the original text--only took root in Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, as the venture of translating European literature took off. In the preceding centuries the Japanese government had banned all European literature, fearing the spread of Christianity; the rare attempts at translation from European languages into the Japanese had been almost entirely limited to scientific works in fields such as medicine, geography and astronomy. It is therefore not surprising that after the Meiji government lifted the ban one of the very first books to be translated was the Bible (the book usually among the first to be translated into any language). It is not surprising, furthermore, that in the beginning of this new phase, the European works were turned into fantastic adaptations. Many of the novels and plays were made into Japanese stories, with the Japanese characters living in Japan. Even when the texts were actually translated rather than adapted, the translators felt free to abridge the original, insert digressions, even come up with their own endings.

Once again, what is amazing about human beings is how quickly we can understand a new way of looking at things, and once that happens, how pervasive our understanding becomes. Futabatei Shimei, considered to be the first modern novelist in Japan, is not only the founder of the modern vernacular but also one of the very few to first genuinely understand the present-day notion of translation. Born before the Meiji Restoration, Futabatei had in fact done all that had to be done to transform the Japanese literature into a modern literature, and did so while still in his twenties. Growing up before Japan developed its own system of education with its own professors, he had the good fortune to study Russian in a foreign language school where every subject, including literature, was taught by Russians in the Russian language, and Futabatei ended up becoming bilingual. Like so many of his generation, he saw himself as a patriot and his initial reason for studying Russian was to know the language of the enemy. Instead, he fell in love with Russian literature, became a novelist, and began translating Turgenev. What made his translations radically different from the previous ones was his determination to remain faithful to the original. In fact, he was so obsessed with recreating the original in Japanese that he is said to have counted the letters in the Russian words and then tried to use the same number of signs in Japanese – an attempt which inevitably failed. Yet around the same time the concept of translations faithful to the original was making its way onto the Japanese literary scene, and the significance of each of such achievements was soon recognized. Suddenly, stories ceased to be only stories. Their words attained the status of Words. Stories became novels, accompanied by all the modern ideas typically attached to the genre: the notion of text, of authorship, and even of intellectual property rights.

Today all this is history and--as is usually the case with history--is nearly forgotten, even by the Japanese. Yet I always find it refreshing and even humbling to go back to a time when the notion of translating a novel, completely taken for granted today, still was nebulous. Thinking about the trajectory literary translation had to undergo forces a novelist to face the fundamental paradox of her vocation. For it is in the aporia, the slight gap between a storyteller and the author of a text that her vocation will always reside.

Having spent twenty years of my life in an English-speaking world, I am more conscious than most other Japanese writers of one thing: I am not merely writing but I am writing *in the Japanese language*. This leads me to my a seemingly contradictory enterprise.

On the one hand, I want to bring the readers' attention to the materiality of the Japanese language (or, theoretically, of any language) as that which resists translation. After the initial struggle to translate the European languages into Japanese was over, the possibility of translation has become so much taken for granted in Japan that the Japanese are often no longer aware of the problem inherent in an act of translation, let alone in an act of translation between two languages as far apart as

English and Japanese. To stress this point, one of my novels, *Sisbosetsu From Left To Right*, has a bilingual format. By mixing some English sentences into a Japanese novel, that is, by juxtaposing the two languages, the novel underscores the deep abyss separating the two languages, and hence the impossibility of reproducing the materiality of one language into another--ultimately even the impossibility of translation itself. Moreover, by assuming that Japanese readers are capable of understanding the English that appears in the novel, the novel also underscores the asymmetry between English, the *de facto* universal language of the day and Japanese, a language merely local, thereby bringing home to the readers the fact that they are not just reading a novel, but reading a novel in the Japanese language.

On the other hand, I also want to bring the readers' attention the possibility of translation as the very condition of modern Japanese literature (or, theoretically, of any modern literature). Another one of my novels, *A Real Novel*, is a conscious rewriting of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* in postwar Japan. The narrator of *A Real Novel* says that it was the translation of *Wuthering Heights* which she had read as a girl which eventually led her to want to rewrite the novel in Japanese, but this is something that must be taken with a grain of salt. For, although the modern Japanese literature had freely borrowed from the European novels in its early years, in becoming increasingly modern it grew gradually less inclined to admit to such borrowing; increasingly it caught up with the notion of originality. The Japanese novelists continued to have no qualms borrowing from their own classical literature, for the classical Japanese literature had long cherished the tradition of reworking from the pre-existing material**. Yet as far as borrowing from the European novels, the Japanese novelists eventually gave up the practice, at least on the conscious level. The literary institution as such began suppressing the early history of modern Japanese literature, and the memory of how much the emergence of this very literature owed to the earlier borrowing from the West. In fact, a recent discovery that the most popular novel during the Meiji period, *Konjiki Yasha (The Demon Gold)*, had originally been based on an American dime novel so surprised the Japanese public that it became a headline on the front pages of several major newspapers. *A Real Novel* is at once an attempt to rectify such suppression of our history and a tribute to the possibility of translation as a movement that had always enriched and shall continue to enrich world literature.

* In recent history, the Koreans had by and large abandoned their own practice of mixing the Chinese characters with phonetic signs, though it now appears to be now coming back.

**In a major poetic tradition, the *bonkadori*, a poet would compose a new poem by making a variation out of an earlier well-known poem.

