

Minae Mizumura

On Translation

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to the Japanese language, in the hope of giving you some idea of the kind of difficulties one encounters in translating Japanese into the European languages, or 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 belongs, along with the Korean, to the Ural-Altai family. But the claim remains hypothetical.

Let me point out a couple of features in the Japanese language that would seem most strange for those who are only familiar with the European languages. For example, you do not need a grammatical subject in Japanese to have a grammatically complete sentence. “淋しい” (Sabishii) means (someone is) lonely. It is a complete sentence, but there is no subject. The sentence can 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 can also mean that there exists a vague sense of loneliness which need not be specified. A sentence can be very long and still be without a subject. In the *Tale of Genji*, you may have three long sentences without subjects, yet each with a different subject implied. You are supposed to figure out to whom the sentence refers by the different degree in the narrator’s use of honorifics (which is another feature of the Japanese language). The narrator of the *Tale of Genji*, who is a lady in waiting, would reserve the highest honorifics for the Emperor. It is true that in some European languages, such as Italian, one can come up with a grammatically complete sentence without a named subject. But the subject can be determined by the inflection of the verb (and often also by the changes in the articles, adjectives and nouns): “Sono sola,” “Sei solo.”

In fact, the Japanese language does not even have personal pronouns the way that the European languages do. There is no word in Japanese which is the equivalent of the English “I,” the most essential personal pronoun in European language. Instead, Japanese has many variations of the word that means “I”: 私、あたし、わたくし、俺、僕、吾輩、あたい、おいら、わらわ、うち、おいどん、手前, to name just a few. Each denotes a varying degree of culture (or the lack of culture), urbanity, femininity or masculinity, or even pompousness and humbleness. As a consequence, a Japanese speaker must use different forms of “I” depending on the person to whom he is speaking. These floating “I”s make it impossible for the notion of universal subjectivity, implied in the “I” of the European languages, to exist in Japanese.

However, I do not believe that Japanese is unique in these linguistic features. I

even imagine that, if more languages are studied from a less Euro centric perspective, the existence of personal pronouns such as “I,” for example, may be perceived as what sets the European languages apart from the rest (The notion of the Subject may even be a linguistic by-product). What I believe to be unique about the Japanese language is its writing system. It is the only language I know that mixes ideograms (the Chinese characters), with phonetic signs*— two kinds of phonetic signs. Hence, three different signs coexist within any Japanese text. Ideogram is used for nouns and verbs, and can always be replaced with either of the phonetic signs. Of the two phonetic signs, 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, can be written: 薔薇、ばら、 or バラ. Here you have a translation of a famous American poem in its variations: A rose is a rose is a rose.

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| 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 |
| D | (バラ ハ バラ ハ バラ デアル) | bara wa bara wa bara dearu |

The four lines are all pronounced the same but each gives a very different impression in Japanese; the meaning is inextricably connected to the combination of signs one chooses. I would choose translation B, the one in all “hiragana,” for Gertrude Stein, because it is the simplest and yet, the most confusing. As you can see, Japanese is a visually-oriented language.

This system of writing is a product of history. The Japanese did not have a writing system until the Chinese characters were introduced in the 5th or 6th century by Korean intellectuals who had fled Korea because of political upheavals. 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 a totally different language, ingeniously invented ways to cope with the problem. On the one hand, as you have seen, the Japanese conceived their own system of writing in the vernacular which mixes Chinese with the newly created phonetic signs. On the other hand, the Japanese conceived a highly developed a decoding method, in which one would decipher the Chinese texts by systematically changing the word order to fit into the Japanese language. Chinese word order in a sentence, 我愛汝** (I love you), will thus be systematically converted into Japanese word order, 我は汝を愛する (I you love) . This method not only allowed two kinds of written text to coexist in Japan, one in the vernacular and the other in Chinese, but also allowed the Japanese to bypass the problem of translation until the country opened its doors to the West – which finally brings us to

the discussion of translation.

What amazes me about us human beings is our almost innate capacity to distinguish “what is NOT only a story” from “what is only a story”, not in a real sense, but in a genuinely literary sense. The philosophy, religion, science (and often poetry) – all come under the rubric of Truth, because, there, the true meaning of the words, are, in principle, unalterable. There, one is not allowed to mess around with the original text--no free adaptations, no free participation of the imagination of others. The only way to transcribe those unalterable words into another language is an act of translation, an act which presupposes a respect for the original text. And we humans have always known more or less which writings required us to remain faithful to the true meaning of the text. Conversely, we humans have also always known which writings are only stories that we can infinitely alter.

The coexistence of the two kinds of written text in Japan, Chinese and the vernacular, meant that the present-day notion of translation did not exist in Japan. On the one hand, all the Chinese texts that came under the rubric of Truth, (Buddhist sutras, Confucius teachings, Classics) needed no translation because people who read them, the educated males, could decipher their meanings in the original. On the other hand, the Chinese prose fiction was freely adapted into the vernacular language; there was no lines drawn between getting an inspiration, borrowing few plot lines, putting the story into a Japanese context, or loosely translating the story.

The present-day notion of translating novels, that is, translating a story with a respect for the original text, only took root in Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when people began translating European novels. In the preceding centuries, because the Japanese government had banned European literature to enter Japan, fearing the spread of Christianity, the rare attempts at translation had been limited to purely scientific works. It is therefore not surprising that, after the Meiji government lifted the ban, one of the very first books to be translated were the *Bible* and the *Pilgrim's Progress* (Bible is universally the first book to be translated). It is not surprising, furthermore, that, in the beginning, the European literature was not translated but turned into fantastic adaptations. They were made into Japanese stories, with the Japanese characters in Japanese places.

Once again, what amazes me about us human beings, how quickly we can understand a new way of looking at things, and once that happens, how thoroughly our understanding goes. A writer who is considered the first modern novelist in Japan – also considered the inventor of the modern vernacular – is also the one who first fully understood the present-day notion of translation. In fact, Futabatei Shimei, born several years before Natsume Soseki, had done all there had to be done to transform the Japanese

literature into a modern literature, and he had done so all in his twenties. Growing up before Japan developed its own system of education, he enrolled himself in a foreign language school where every subject, including literature, was taught, by lack of other teachers, by a Russian in Russian. He ended up becoming bilingual and translated a short story by Turgenev. What made his translation totally 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 even counted the number of alphabets in the original and tried to use the same number of sings in Japanese – an attempt which inevitably failed. But the importance of his attempt was immediately recognized. Suddenly, a story ceased to be only a story. Its words attained the status of the Words. Story became a novel, with all the modern notions attached to the genre: the notion of text, of authorship, and even of intellectual property rights.

Now, all this is history, and as it usually is 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, which is totally taken for granted today, was still a nebulous notion. Thinking about the trajectory the notion had to travel forces a novelist to face the fundamental paradox of her vocation. For it is in the aporia between a storyteller and the author of a text that her vocation will always reside.

* In recent history, Koreans basically stopped their own practice of mixing the Chinese characters with a phonetic sign, but I hear that the practice is now coming back.

** This is a wrong character, but I could not find the right one in my computer.

