

The 'impossibility' of translation

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Special to The Daily Yomiuri

“To be, or not to be—that is the question.” The famous line is easy to translate into French or German. You can just replace words with equivalents from the other language. In French this becomes “entre ou ne pas être”; in German “sein oder nichtsein.” Even Chinese is straightforward: “shengcun huo huimie.” When translating into these languages you can avoid thinking deeply about what Shakespeare meant. You can leave the task of interpretation to the audience, just as it is in English.

But Hamlet’s famous lines have been a formidable challenge to Japanese translators. Japanese has no infinitive form, nor the word “be.” The only possibility is to “interpret the phrase,” creating something new. Of the various attempts made to render Hamlet’s soliloquy into Japanese, three in particular are famous.

Shoyo Tsubouchi, the first to translate Hamlet into Japanese, was a novelist, playwright, critic and translator in the Meiji era. His “To be or not to be” is “Nagarahuru ka nagarahenu ka.” This is written style and relatively close to the original meaning. It is a well-turned phrase, but is about twice as long as the original.

The second famous translator, Tsuneari Fukuda, also a playwright, critic and stage director, made things curt and straightforward: “Sei ka shi ka” (“Life or death”). In terms of length, this closely parallels the original. But does the original really mean this? Does not the translation limit the interpretation? That is, indeed, the question.

Contemporary translator and critic Yushi Odajima challenged prior works of translation with this controversial creation: “Konomama de ii no ka ikenai no ka” (“May I leave it as it is, or not?” or “May I remain as I am, or not?”). He made his own interpretation, making an awfully long translation for half a line from a soliloquy.

I hope you see that I’m not talking about which translation is “better” (a question of interpretation, in all senses of that word). I seek to illustrate the challenge or, more precisely, the impossibility, of translation.

The Language Connection page of this paper, of which my humble article is a small part, has a haiku section. It is a marvelous thing that people worldwide now enjoy this shortest of poetic forms, which originated in Japan. Clearly, there is an attraction to the form and its idea of beauty. I wonder, however, if the rhythm of 5-7-5 *mora*, clearly felt in Japanese, can be equally appreciated by speakers of other languages. Does each language not have its own unique ways of playing with words and sounds? Alliteration, for example, seems to be en-

joyed in all languages, but what about iambic rhythm? Japanese, not being accent-based, lacks tools for conveying the feeling of iambic rhythm. English is not *mora*-based; can the rhythm of haiku really be enjoyed, really come through, in English, like it does for Japanese people? Surely, unfortunately, not.

Translation’s challenges pop up everywhere, not only in literary works, but also in everyday business translations.

Here is a typical mistranslation, common even among professional translators, often found in business or economic forecasts put into English. In discussing the future, the Japanese author speculates about events and so ends sentences with *daroo* or *deshoo* (in the original), indicating the statement is provisional, not definitive. Here lies the problem.

When Japanese teachers, and English textbooks, introduce the English future tense in school, they employ the suffixes *daroo* or *deshoo*, as if they correspond to “will.” Actually, Japanese has no future tense! Unfortunately, because of schooling, most Japanese people are imprinted, equating *daroo/deshoo* with the English future tense. Translators are virtually conditioned to translate forecasts into English like this: “The Japanese economy will grow 2 percent next year.” Here, native English readers generally feel like saying: “How do you know? Are you a prophet?”

Even things like this are not the real challenge of translation, though. The difficulty, the impossibility, is to translate something Japanese that does not exist in English (or vice versa). The best you can do is use the closest equivalent English word or phrase possible, and even then explanation might be required. One might confront an inescapable paradox here: Each language develops in its own environment, and words (sounds denoting concepts) evolve in a unique context. A language cannot, as a rule then, mean the same thing with its words as a different language means with its own.

The Romance languages evolved out of Latin; thus they have a common history, which explains why Shakespeare can be translated into French so as to leave interpretation to the audience. But what about languages separated by time and distance? Unfortunately, Shakespeare in Arabic or Japanese requires the translator to interpret for the audience, inevitably changing Shakespeare’s intended meaning.

Another good example is the Japanese word *hansei*. If you look it up in the dictionary, you will find meanings such as: examine one’s conscience, reflect on one’s past conduct, regret what one has done, think about oneself regarding what one has done but could have done better, etc. What you see here are all correct translations of the word, but don’t they give you a rather negative impression? Japanese use the word *hansei* quite a lot, describing using what came before for the future’s betterment. It has a more positive connotation than its English equivalents do. This, however, is a cultural issue that is beyond translation.

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