

Lost in translation : Japanese words and concepts in students' English writing

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Introduction

In an earlier paper (Hobbs 2004) I focused on words and concepts rooted in Japanese culture as they appear in English translations of Japanese novels. Analysis revealed a range of clear and systematic strategies employed by professional translators in order to make the uniquely Japanese comprehensible to English-speaking readers. Japanese students, however, naturally tend to be less sensitive to subtle nuances of meaning than are professional translators, and often restrict themselves to employing one of two basic strategies to express peculiarly Japanese words and concepts in English: a) consult a bilingual dictionary and substitute the given translation for the Japanese word, without adjusting the grammar of the sentence; or b) use the original Japanese word as if it were English, perhaps adding italics or quotation marks. Of course there are occasions when students provide eloquent explanations within text, or substitute a suitable cultural equivalent — *noodles* for *ramen*, *bed* for *futon* — in a way that successfully “deculturalises” the object or concept (Newmark, 1988, p. 83). But there are also many instances in which it is difficult to know exactly what the student was thinking: Did the student who wrote *bride and bridegroom pay “Yuinou” before ceremonial exchange of engagement gifts* believe that *Yuinou* could be understood from the given context, or did she think it only necessary to understand that this is something which the *bride and bridegroom pay*? Perhaps she had a narrower audience (i.e., the Japanese-speaking teacher) in mind? Or perhaps she had simply tired of looking up words in her bilingual dictionary? Whatever the reason, what could be done to encourage such a student to avail herself of one of the many translation strategies that might enable her to better express her thoughts?

Strategies employed by professional translators

Venuti (1995, p. 18) defines translation as “the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language reader.” In other words, the translator need not and cannot be expected to account for every trait and subtle nuance of meaning that makes the original text unique. Rather, the translator’s task is to convey to the target reader those meanings and nuances deemed most relevant in a given context. Hence we may find

yukata left as *yukata* in one context, translated as *summer kimono* in another, and appearing as *thin cotton robe* in yet another. Attempting to determine the *correct* translation is futile—translation is inherently more art than science, although students do not always realize this—and the choice will depend on both the context and the personal preferences of the translator. Faced with translating a particularly problematic word or phrase from Japanese to English, a translator might choose any one of the following strategies:

a) Borrowing

In many cases the translator is able to *borrow* a word or phrase from the Japanese text, confident that the reader will either already be familiar with the word or be able to grasp its meaning from context. Consider the following examples from the novel *Distant Thunder* (Tatematsu, 1983/1999):

To prevent yellowing of the tatami and to inhibit mold from growing ... (p. 11)

... its reflection cracked on the surface of the saké he poured into a teacup. (p. 56)

The men settled down and read manga. (p. 96)

In some cases nothing distinguishes the Japanese word from the surrounding English, but in others the translator may add touches that signal the foreignness of a word or phrase, such as the acute accent on *saké* or the italicization of *manga*.

b) Borrowing plus footnote

A different translator, in a different context, might decide that a footnote is necessary to provide additional information in a way that does not disturb the flow of the text. Below is an example from the novel *Shiokari Pass* (Miura, 1973/1987):

Masayuki placed his hands together on the tatami matting with grave formality. (p. 21)

(Footnote: Japanese homes are mostly floored with mats of woven straw.)

c) Definition within text

At other times the translator may choose to offer a definition within the text. This may take the form of parallel nominal phrases:

... one evening in Obon, the Festival of the Dead, ... (Miura, 1973/1987, p. 169)

finding it hard to move in his hakama, a pleated garment, ... (Tatematsu, 1983/ 1999, p. 250)

A variation of this strategy might see one Japanese word defined as a subclass of another (*summer kimono* for *yukata*, *apprentice geisha* for *maiko*), or the original Japanese word retained to define a subclass of its own rough translation (*ramen noodles* for *ramen*, *futon bed* for *futon*). Note that in addition to the use of a footnote, the above example of *tatami matting* also employs this strategy.

Alternatively, the translator may choose to *deculturalise* a word or phrase by removing the Japanese word and leaving in its place a definition composed of concepts rooted in Western culture. In

its simplest form, this strategy might see *zabuton* translated as *cushion* or *futon* as *bed*. More often, though, translators choose to represent a particular Japanese object as a subclass of a more general item familiar to domestic readers. This often results in one Japanese word being expressed by two English words. For example, in *Shiokari Pass* we find *obi* translated as *ornamental waistband* (p.93), *ramune* as *fizzy drink* (p.25), and *butsudan* as *family altar* (p.55). However, the defining text need not necessarily be grouped together, but can be subtly worked into the surrounding text, as in the following translation of *teraterabozu* in *Shiokari Pass*:

The little paper doll that Machiko had made as a charm to keep the rain away, hung limply from the eaves. (p. 90)

d) Explanation instead of translation

A related strategy, and one rarely found in students' writing, is that of explaining rather than translating, in effect conceding that a word or phrase is all but untranslatable. For example, there is simply no English equivalent to the Japanese *yoroshiku onegai shimasu*, and while the exclamation *tadaima* could reasonably be translated as *I'm home*, most English-speaking cultures do not have a ritual exchange to match the *tadaima—okaerinasai* exchange heard every day in millions of Japanese homes. In Miura (1973/1987, p.44) *okaerinasai* is cleverly worked into the text as *customary words of greeting*, while the exclamation *itadakimasu* typically uttered before beginning to eat is similarly expressed as the *customary words of thanks* (p.43). On another occasion there is a sentence that would literally translate as *Without hesitating in front of her father and husband, Misa cried loudly*. Sensing that English-speaking readers may not have the requisite background knowledge to correctly interpret the author's intention, the translators subtly add their own explanatory text by translating the sentence as *Disregarding Japanese custom, Misa burst into loud sobs in her father's and husband's presence* (p.250).

Translation strategies in students' writing

Professional translators naturally have little trouble choosing an appropriate strategy to suit a given context, but how do students fare? In the current study English compositions by undergraduate students at two Japanese universities were examined for the use of translation strategies. The students numbered roughly 200 in total, and ranged in level from upper beginner to intermediate. Some compositions were written as assignments for a writing class, while others were homework assignments in a general English class that focused mainly on speaking and listening. The compositions varied in length and touched on wide a range of topics. Several of the translation strategies discussed above were evident, and the strategy employed was often successful, but there was also evidence that many students struggle to choose a strategy appropriate to the context, and that some may be unaware that there are contexts in which the dictionary translation is not appropriate. The qualitative analysis presented below is not rigorous enough for us to draw definitive conclusions, but the examples presented hint at a number of possible avenues for future research.

Successes

When students' writing touches on strongly culture-related topics — weddings, food, and so on—they face the task of expressing in English many words and phrases for which there may be no obvious English equivalent. In many cases they are up to the challenge, and in using borrowed words many appear to show awareness of which Japanese words have crossed the cultural divide and entered into the English language :

It isn't more healthy than tofu
I like pachinko but not very lucky
Drinking sake with egg is also...
...dressed in kimonos...

There are also some instances in which a student seems aware that a word is neither known to English speakers, nor has an obvious English equivalent, and is able to provide the necessary explanation/elaboration to make the Japanese word comprehensible. The following is one particularly noteworthy example :

There are many different kind of green teas. The most common is sencha. Ma-cha is bitter.
It is powder tea used in tea ceremony.

Sometimes more advanced vocabulary suggests sensible use of a bilingual dictionary :

I like tofu. It is made from soy beans that have been boiled, pressed and coagulated.
It was "Golden Week"...The succession of holidays from April 30th to May 3rd.

However, excepting those compositions written after explicit instruction on translation strategies had been given (see below), such examples are very much the exception to the rule.

Failures and near misses

More notable than the successes described above is the large number of instances in which explanation/elaboration is clearly lacking. More specifically, while there is one instance of a student who writes of *udon noodles* and *somen noodles*, on the whole there is a notable lack of examples that fall between the two extremes of a straightforward borrowing and a lengthy definition. One striking feature of the compositions is an abundance of borrowed words unlikely to be familiar to most native English speakers, appearing without any supporting explanatory text :

I have a large space which is "9.5 jou" in my home
My favorite garlic food is Gyouza

Other examples of unexplained borrowings included *negi*, *yakisoba*, *engawa*, *omiai*, *okayu*, *horigotatsu*, *awamori*, and *syoga*. As to why students chose to include such words in an English

composition, we can only speculate. In some cases the student may genuinely think that the word in question will be understandable to non-speakers of Japanese. It seems more likely, though, that in most cases the student is consciously addressing the teacher, rather than the imaginary non-Japanese speaker we typically encourage them to address (i.e., *I don't know how to express this in English, but the teacher will understand*). Indeed, it is not uncommon to find an overt admission of this within a composition :

...for example "goya", "mimiga" (I don't know how to say these words in English)

Undesirable as this may be, it is perhaps a reminder of the inauthenticity inherent in the typical English writing assignment. While students can be encouraged to write as though addressing a reader with little or no knowledge of Japanese, it can be difficult for them to do so when they know that in reality the composition will be read only by an English teacher resident in Japan, and who in most cases has a knowledge of the Japanese language and culture far greater than that of a typical native English speaker.

However, evidence of some degree of genuine misunderstanding on the part of students is offered by the fact that many struggle to distinguish objects and concepts unique to Japanese culture from ones that can also be found in other cultures. In the students' writing there are many examples of a borrowing being used in place of what seems like an unproblematic direct English translation. For example :

...they have very beautiful cherry blossoms and ume

With *sakura* translated as *cherry blossoms*, why not *plum blossoms* in place of *ume* ? In the same way, the following are found used where one might expect their more obvious English translations: *yukinage* (snowball fight), *unagi* (eel), *kawara* (roof tile), *kokkaigijido* (the Diet building), *nyugaku setsumeikai* (orientation for new students). The situation is further complicated by the intrusion of *wasei eigo*, or *English made in Japan* : Japanese abounds with phrases based on English words, but which do not actually exist in the English language. Examples in the compositions analysed included *virgin road* (the aisle in a church wedding), *candlelight service* (a ceremony in which the bride and groom light candles at the wedding guests' table), and *pierce* (used as a noun). Meanwhile, the example of *zelli* (jelly/jello) showed evidence of a student back-transcribing from katakana to English, a common occurrence that produces false English words such as *salada* (salad), *zemi* (seminar), and *thema* (theme/subject). Clearly, and quite understandably, students have considerable difficulty differentiating between native English and *made-in-Japan* English, and between Japanese words that have and have not passed into the vocabulary of the typical native English speaker. In some cases a student appears to correctly identify the need for explanation/elaboration, only to base that explanation on yet more unfamiliar Japanese words :

...is more popular than oden, a boiled dish of chikuwa, daikon, etc.

Benefits of teaching translation strategies

With one particular class of 40 students, compositions submitted during the first few weeks of the course were notable for the sheer volume of unexplained Japanese words used. *Ume*, *yukinage*, and *unagi* were all from this set of compositions, which also revealed unexplained vocabulary such as *reimen*, *kanazuchi*, and *chingyaorosu*. This trend was identified as one of three common but correctable *bad habits* in the students' writing, the other two being the tendency to begin too many sentences with *And* (instead of combining sentences or using an alternative such as *Also*), and the tendency to end too many sentences with *etc.* (rather than *...and so on* or *such as...*). In a lesson roughly 1 month into the course, during feedback on a homework assignment, 5~10 minutes were taken to explain these three problem areas through a PowerPoint presentation including suggested remedies. The example of I like "*okonomiyaki*" was given as one in which the addition of quotation marks does not do nearly enough to enable the reader to understand, and examples of how to include an explanation in text were given:

I like okonomiyaki, (which is) (a dish) made from...

I like okonomiyaki. Okonomiyaki is made from...

Students were encouraged to take care in future compositions to explain any terms they thought would not be known to a typical native English speaker.

While this certainly did not prove to be an instant remedy, and it remained necessary to draw students' attention to the inappropriate use of unexplained Japanese words in subsequent assignments, there was nevertheless an improvement—specifically, there was a notable increase in attempts to explain terms that might have been left unexplained earlier. In an assignment requiring students to describe popular cold remedies, there were many complex and effective explanations:

1. *...when we have a sore throat, we drink "shoga yu"... shoga-yu is a kind of tea that we mix some ginger and honey in the hot water.*
2. *... for example "Tamago zake". It is the most popular folk remedy of cold. (Egg and sugar were mixed and added little by little to sake that boiled.)*
3. *There is another effective cold remedy. It is the cocktail of egg and sake. The cocktail is called "tamagozake" in Japanese.*
4. *Train your skin by scratching your skin with the towel. In Japan this is called "kanpu masatsu."*
5. *I often eat "okayu" when I have a cold. "Okayu" is rice cooked with a little more water.*
6. *And "kimuchi"—very spicy vegetables—is good, too.*

Conclusions and suggestions for future research.

Admittedly there may be other variables that come into play here, and we must be very careful to consider alternative explanations before drawing firm conclusions about students' progress based on

before/after comparisons of writing based on entirely different topics. However, intuitions should not be dismissed out of hand simply because they are not based directly on computer-generated frequency counts, percentages, and standard deviations. This researcher felt that explicit instruction in one specific translation strategy—that of providing defining/explanatory text to support Japanese words used in English compositions—resulted in a perceptible increase in successful efforts by students to apply this strategy. This tentative finding suggests a wide range of research questions that can potentially be answered by pursuing more rigorous avenues of quantitative enquiry :

1. Is the perceived improvement a direct result of the teaching of the translation strategy, or is it due to other factors (e.g., different topics, natural improvement with each successive assignment)?
2. Can translation strategies be taught effectively (and if so how?), or is it better to leave students to acquire them naturally?
3. If the translation strategies described at the beginning of this paper can be taught, are all equally teachable, or are some more teachable than others?
4. How does the ability to use translation strategies vary between students at different levels?
5. Where students fail, to what extent is their failure due to lack of awareness of translation strategies, and to what extent is it due to lack of awareness of the degree of knowledge about Japan and Japanese in the target culture?

It is to be hoped that future research will reveal clear answers to some of these questions.

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