

## The Other Art of the Possible

John Bester

To start by putting my cards on the table: As I interpret it, the word "translation," in relation to literature at least, signifies the attempt to render faithfully into one language (normally, one's own) the meaning, feeling, and, so far as possible, the style of a piece written in another language. I do not believe it is a translator's duty, without very good reason, to cut, add, rewrite, or rearrange just because he happens to disapprove of what is written, finds it long-winded, thinks he could have done it better himself, or has himself failed to understand it properly. A writer who has set out to create literature has a right to ask the reader to judge his work as it is, without, if at all possible, the interposition of another ego.

Having started rather aggressively, I should add immediately that I realize that this can only be an ideal. Translation, like politics, is an art of the possible; compromise is inevitable and universal. Even so, I still feel that before, say, cutting something, a translator should make every effort—including conferring with the author if necessary—to make sure that he has really understood. And if for commercial or other reasons—to make the work saleable, to salvage something worthwhile that would not otherwise be available to the general reader—he feels obliged to perform surgery of some kind, he owes it to the reader to say so in a note.

Above all, translation should not be allowed to become a vehicle for the translator's own frustrated urge to create. After all, if done properly, translation—particularly when the two languages concerned are as far apart as Japanese and English—should carry with it at least some sense of creative achievement.

I should add that when I talk of the translation of literature I am referring to prose. I personally have reservations about the translation of poetry, and I avoid it

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except in translating a prose work in which poetry occurs incidentally. This is a personal idiosyncrasy, I admit. The translation of Japanese verse is necessary, and there are translators who do it extremely well, with impressive, sometimes moving, results. But I myself do not have a sufficient feeling for the patterns of sound and accent in Japanese verse to attempt it.

At the same time, I feel that to translate Japanese verse, whose essence is the minimal, is voluntarily to renounce the best potentials of English as a language of poetry. It means giving up most of the possibilities of verbal polyphony—the interplay of natural stress accent and underlying meter, the phonetic complexities of the language, with its long and short vowels and its consonant clusters—that are the essence of English poetry. English, moreover, with its complex syntax and its precise use of a large number of seemingly unimportant words (articles and prepositions, for example) whose manipulation can create such subtle overtones, needs above all a certain *space* to achieve its effects. The translation of haiku, for example, may in fact accomplish almost as much as the original set out to do; but it makes the fact that the medium is English almost irrelevant.

I talked in my first paragraph of rendering faithfully the meaning, the feeling, and, so far as possible, the style of a piece of writing. But in a sense these are, obviously, aspects of one and the same thing. What I wanted to say, in short, is that if a passage of Japanese, read by a Japanese reader, is immediately acceptable as natural (irrespective of difficulty of content) linguistically, if it conveys a meaning, and if it produces a certain emotional effect, then the English translation should also, ideally, possess those same qualities in the same degree when it is read by an English-speaking reader. It is their absence that makes for “translationese” (that nonlanguage) or at least for that frustrated feeling of reading yet remaining out of touch with anything familiar in one’s own experience.

This does not mean, of course, that genuine difficulty and unfamiliarity of content do not exist. But it does mean—and this is a subtle point—that the translator must make sure he has got his translation to the point where the difficulty, or the unfamiliarity, can be perceived as such.

To understand better what translation should be, it helps, I feel, to first consider what it should most emphatically not be. This, for me, is summed up in the phrase “direct translation,” or (still more, since the evils it produces are particularly apparent in translation from English into Japanese) in the Japanese word *chokuyaku*. The very use of these terms, except insofar as they denote mechanical “equivalents” put forward, for example, as a temporary aid to children learning a foreign language at school, shows a basic misunderstanding of the nature of language. And so, I hasten to add, does the use of the phrase “free translation” that is often used in opposition to “direct translation.”

In short, there is only one kind of translation, as opposed to travesty: good translation—though a single passage of prose may yield any number of different and, in theory, equally good translations.

In a sense, of course, what I say here is impossibly theoretical and idealistic. But I am convinced that with up-and-coming translators this principle should be drummed into them firmly at the outset, to remain as a hidden guide in later days when they come to apply it flexibly and in awareness of the need for compromise.

I have implied above that the problem of "direct translation" exists in fairly subtle form in most translations from Japanese into English done by native speakers of English, and in grosser form in many translations of English into Japanese done by Japanese. Why should there be a difference here? The real reason, which only formulated itself in my mind comparatively recently, would seem to be as follows.

Where an English-speaking translator has failed to understand a piece of Japanese properly, he has usually done one of several things. He may have mistranslated it. He may have cut it. He may have rearranged it somehow to make it appear to make sense. But however different it may be from the original, the piece of English that he has produced at the end of the process will rarely be something that is frankly not English, or that makes little sense at all. In short, he will have a certain sense of responsibility toward his own language at least.

In this sense, my preliminary strictures against chopping and changing were primarily aimed at non-Japanese translators. The Japanese translator, generally, will be less, in a sense, arrogant and more willing to solve the question by making a *chokuyaku*. There are, of course, excellent Japanese translators, but there are also a surprising number who will turn out Japanese that is not, in the last analysis, really understandable at all, or that, even when it is understandable, is so stiff, or so subtly unpleasant- or aggressive-sounding that it distorts the whole feeling of the original and does a grave injustice to the writer. It reminds me of the kind of essentially un-Japanese voice that a few Japanese TV actors feel compelled to adopt when reading dialogue dubbed into a foreign movie: It may be artificial, but then, it's foreign.

I realize, of course, that the sophisticated reader will often make allowances for such distortions when reading what he knows is a translation. I realize, too, that mistranslations and "direct" translations may, with frequent use, come to be understandable and even to enrich the language (how many of the turns of phrase that we cherish from the King James version of the Bible were originally mistaken or clumsy renderings of the original?).

But the problem is much more than that. It boils down to the fact that in general the Japanese, readers and editors alike, are far more passive, undemanding, and unanalytical where the written word is concerned. The reader is far more likely to accept something without considering analytically whether what is written is likely from a common-sense point of view, or even—if it is a translation—whether it is correct as Japanese. The editors are far more likely to feel a vague responsibility toward the person who has written the piece, particularly if he is already well-known, than toward their readers, or their publication, or themselves.

If this sounds like the kind of generalization, arrogant and aggressive in tone, that many non-Japanese make about Japan, I must say that I honestly believe it is not

so (though I believe that the situation may well be improving nowadays). Twenty years ago, I wrote a piece in English on Mishima Yukio's death for a well-known Japanese literary journal. Exactly 20 years later—in October 1990—I wrote another piece in English for the same journal on the difficulties of translating Mishima. In both cases, my article was translated by an educated Japanese whose normal understanding of English, I would have said, was very good. In both cases, I was appalled when I read the first translation.

In the first place, the Japanese was in parts difficult to understand, even to myself who had supposedly written the original. In the second place, what had been (I hope) fairly natural in the original had become unnaturally stiff and abstract. Phrases that had been chosen to be nonirritating, or to show diffidence, had become hard and aggressive. In short, the idea that the piece might have appeared as it stood brought me out into a cold sweat.

What was more alarming was that the editor in charge behaved as though he would have been quite content to leave it as it was. An experienced and sensitive man, he was presumably, in part, hesitant to interfere with something written originally in English by a foreigner with some experience in language. Even so, when I explained some of my objections and got him to cooperate in rewriting large sections of the piece—which he did very readily—he was still capable of saying, for example, "Yes, the translator certainly seems to have been too accurate (*seikaku*) here." "Accurate" here meaning, of course, in accordance with certain dictionary definitions and syntactical parallels conceived of as precise and binding.

The amount of subtle mistranslation from English that, unnoticed by the original writer and the reading public, must be perpetrated daily makes the mind boggle. It boggles still more at the thought of the subtle, accumulative effect this must have on international understanding. (Part of the trouble here is that there are few non-Japanese around who can do more than, at the most, check such translations for superficial word-to-word correspondence.) But the situation will not change so long as English teachers will cheerfully translate the English in their textbooks into Japanese that is unnatural and conveys absolutely no sense of actual situation; so long as businessmen and others will airily tell you that they are bad at English conversation "though they can read and write it of course"; and until people concerned with publication become more sophisticated and analytical concerning problems of language.

I respect those Japanese in the field—and I have met quite a lot of them—who tackle the problems with sensitivity, humility, and an appreciation of the complexity and subtlety of the English language. But I would warn any English speaker who is in a position to have something of his own translated into Japanese to make absolutely certain that he secures the services of one of that relatively small band.

For anyone concerned with translation, then, it is necessary that he should have a fairly clear idea always in his mind of what that should, ideally, mean, and also that he should have thought a lot about, and acquired a certain sophistication concerning,

the nature of verbal communication as such. Only on this basis can he tackle profitably the more practical difficulties of translating between Japanese and English.

Most translators must at some time or other have had the experience of telling a Japanese about their work and being met with a half-compassionate, half-skeptical look and some remark on the following lines:

"That must be terribly difficult. Japanese has so many words that just don't exist in English. I mean, like *kamaboko*. How do you translate *kamaboko*?"

"Well," you say, "one dictionary said 'fish sausage'. . . ."

"Ah, yes—'fish sausage'. . . ." comes the reply, with a look of deepened compassion and deepened conviction that the translation of Japanese is, after all, impossible.

Fish sausage and the like are, in fact, one of translation's minor problems, nevertheless the question of how to deal with such words remains a problem. Of course, if you are translating a work on, say, pottery, the reader can be expected to accept Japanese words in italics, with suitable explanations, as technical terms. I suppose, too, one ought to be grateful that increasing familiarity with Japanese living habits and interiors has brought words like *shoji* into the dictionary—and even in many cases freed them from italics.

Even so, there are cases where a plant, a tree, or a special food—particularly one that has all kinds of associations for the Japanese reader—plays a prominent part in a work. What to do if the dictionary yields nothing more than a Latin name? How can you end a novel with "She walked slowly away into the distance, leaving the *miscanthus sinensis* swaying in the gentle breeze"?

Certainly, I am not about to recommend to hopeful young translators a solution I once adopted myself. In Ibuse Masuji's *Black Rain* (Kuroi Ame, 1965; tr. 1969), a plant was mentioned that I could not trace anywhere. I imagine it was a homely weed, familiar in the Hiroshima area, where it had its own familiar name. Anyway, I could not find it—so I invented what seemed to me an equally homely English name, sounding as if it came straight out of the British countryside.

Probably, my highhandedness on that occasion will earn me an extra year in that special purgatory reserved for translators. What makes me wonder if I will get away with a single year is that *Black Rain* was subsequently translated into various European languages on the basis of the English version. I still suffer pangs of conscience at the thought of some earnest Lithuanian ferreting through multivolume botanical dictionaries in search of the nonexistent.

Highhanded, perhaps—but I just cannot feel as exercised by the fish sausage question as my more pedantic friends. These are minor practical matters, to be solved, if possible, in a practical way; I commend them to my fellow translators' common sense.

A much more important question is the kind of abstract word that embodies an

attitude or experience, or a psychological characteristic, peculiar to the culture concerned. An example that comes to mind from my own experience in translating Doi Takeo's *Amae no Kozo* (Anatomy of Dependence, 1971; tr. 1973) is the word *amae* itself. Here you have a word that embodies a genuinely Japanese experience—though its equivalents will be found, in different forms, elsewhere. You can find English nouns and adjectives that, given the right contexts, will convey at least part of the meaning—words such as “indulgence,” “(excessive) dependence,” and so on. But none of them are satisfactory in themselves in covering the overall range of meaning in *amae*.

In such cases, the solution seems to be a judicious use of the original Japanese word (or an English word, highlighted at first by quotation marks) as a technical term, together with a few words of explanation either in the text or as a footnote, combined with a variety of different, approximate translations chosen for the contexts in which they appear. Thus the concept is approached, as it were, from different angles; the reader is conditioned to accept the word as a technical term and at the same time gradually familiarized with its content through a number of approximations.

More interesting still from a literary viewpoint is the question of how to deal with dialects, or with speech peculiar to certain situations or sections of society. I am often asked about the handling of dialect in connection with the translation of Miyazawa Kenji's children's stories. Here, I have to declare myself at the outset opposed to the use of any specific dialect to translate the Tohoku-area Japanese that figures so prominently here.

In part, perhaps, this is self-serving, since I do not believe I would have the technical facility to sustain any dialect for long enough. But it is also that I feel that the actual cultural and geographical associations of local British speech overwhelm the personalities of Miyazawa's countryfolk.

My solution, then? To aim at a speech that vaguely suggests a dialect, or at least the rustic and the homely, yet cannot be linked to any one locality. I do not know whether this compromise succeeds—inevitably, in the last analysis it means a hodgepodge of memories of country speech culled from a variety of places or books. But I cannot see a better solution. Nor do I feel really happy with the kind of translation that makes young Japanese of today talk in, say, the accents of contemporary American youth. Inevitably this suggests a whole culture and set of attitudes to life that are still largely alien to the Japanese.

A very special difficulty in translating Japanese into English lies in the ability of Japanese to suggest, by the use of verbal forms, pronouns, and a few particles, a wide range of attitudes in human relationships from subservience to extreme familiarity. This aspect of Japanese, irksome if not repulsive at first to the foreigner, can come to be seen as one of its chief attractions, capable in both everyday life and in literature of evoking a very subtle spectrum of feeling. As a kind of appendix to this, there is the difference between men's and women's speech.

It gradually dawned on me—in translating, for example, Yoshiyuki Junnosuke's *The Dark Room* (Anshitsu, 1969; tr. 1975), where male-female relationships, engaged in under peculiarly Japanese circumstances, form a large part of the action, and in translating ordinary Japanese conversations in other novels—just how necessary it is to *hear* the conversations in one's mind's ear, then to change a verb here, add an adverb there in the English so as to bring out a flavor or an implication that a "direct" translation would ignore but which is there, unmistakably, in the original.

If a spoken sentence ends in *yo*, it may be necessary to change the "he said" that follows to "he declared" or some other more emphatic verb. A simple "*Iyaan*" from, say, a girl in a bar may need to be translated not as "No!" but as "'I don't *want* to,' she wailed (whined)," depending on the context. If a boy from a poor family watches another boy playing with an expensive toy and, pointing, says "*Ii nee!*" the English may become "'Look!' he said wistfully." These are only random examples, but in none of them, I believe, are my suggested equivalents "overtranslations"; the precise flavor is already there, in the original, in each case.

Sometimes the translator has to admit defeat. The book I am working on at the moment contains a lot of dialogue between *yakuza* (actually, not modern *yakuza* but old-style professional gamblers). They habitually address each other as *aniki* (elder brother) or *kyodai* (brother, sibling; used between bosses of friendly gangs), but I still have not found a way of coping with this that conveys something of the flavor of the relationships yet does not sound forced or quaint in English.

Ultimately, the greatest difficulties lie in the differences between the languages themselves. First, there is the obvious fact that English and Japanese are utterly unrelated in basic vocabulary, syntax, and so on, with few exact correspondences. This is compounded by the fact that for most people on both sides the first approach to the other language is through grammar books and dictionaries—which means that they are exposed to supposed "equivalencies" in sentence patterns and vocabulary, "equivalencies" that are helpful as a first stage but are going to hinder a translator's progress later on.

In my own case, it was fairly late in the day that I stopped standing Japanese sentences on their heads ("everything's in the reverse order!"). It was some while before I began to consider what actually happens when we talk or write and realized that although Japanese and English seem syntactically far apart, the order in which specific ideas or images rise to the mind is not necessarily so different. This would have happened much earlier if I had been trained in simultaneous interpretation.

I began to see that ". . . *no de*" is often better rendered as "so (that) . . ." or "with the result that . . ." rather than "since . . .," "as . . .," or "because . . ."; that "*X o shinagara Y o shita*" is sometimes more faithfully translated as "I X'd as I Y'd" than as "I Y'd while X'ing"; and so on. These are the kinds of insights that occur fairly early on, of course, but the ramifications of the same principle become increasingly subtle and more fascinating as one gets deeper into the business of translation.

In this way, I became obsessed with the attempt to preserve the flow of ideas

and images in their original, that is, natural, order. I found that once you get the knack, it not only produces a better translation but often makes the process easier. This raised in turn the question of cases where it is absolutely necessary to reverse the Japanese order, bring a final verb or conjunction up to the front of a sentence or clause. But this kind of problem—however interesting to the translator—is too complex to go into here.

Another essential difference between the two languages creates more subtle difficulties. English, a highly organized language, uses a multitude of small words— indefinite or definite articles (and, by implication, their omission), an elaborate system of prepositions, complex verb forms, and so on—in order to make precise its meaning from moment to moment and show in which direction its thought is tending.

Japanese is different. Lacking such a complex system, it relies to a much greater extent on context, or on an appeal to the reader, to make its meaning clear. This does not necessarily mean that Japanese is “vaguer.” It does mean, though, that it relies on simpler methods to convey complex ideas or feelings, taking more for granted and—especially in literature—seeking to evoke the familiar, the shared experience, in order to eke out the bare words. Consequently, there is often, genuinely, more there than meets the non-Japanese, or at least the unpracticed, eye.

A corollary to what I have just written is that, precisely because English keeps such a tight grip on the sense of a sentence, it is sometimes possible to condense a lot of meaning into a single abstract noun without danger of ambiguity. This is not necessarily so in Japanese; in fact, the attempt to use abstract nouns as they are used in English without the benefit of all those little words can sometimes cause genuine obscurity in a writer like Mishima. For a non-Japanese translator to know how to wrap up half a line of Japanese into a single abstract noun, or for a Japanese translator to know when to unravel the meaning of an English noun into something “softer” and more approachable in Japanese, is an essential requirement for “faithful” translation in my sense.

What, then, in the most general terms, are the essential requirements for becoming a good translator? I am talking now, of course, of the kind of translation that, if not exactly literature, at least requires more than the simple ability to understand a Japanese (or English) text on a practical subject and turn it into serviceable English (or Japanese). I take for granted, too, a good working knowledge of the other language and an ability to write a tolerably sensitive prose in one’s own.

My usual reply to the question, then, is something on the lines of “flexibility and humility.” However, since the “humility” sounds rather priggish, and since, at any rate, it simply means being willing to accept the conclusions arising from the flexible approach, I will settle here for the “flexibility” alone.

What do I mean by it? On the practical level, the ability of a translator not to be



tied by dictionary definitions and syntactical preconceptions but to hold a sentence, with all its possibilities, in his head, while the mysterious computer of the mind gets to work and, out of any number of possible combinations of words and meanings, selects the combination that seems, instinctively, "right" — right, that is, in terms of the context and of the probabilities of human thought, feelings, and behavior.

I try myself to realize this process in the following way. I allow as many translations of individual words and turns of phrase as possible to come into my head, and I set them all down. The result may be a monstrous sentence twice as long as it will eventually be, but I press on and do the same with the next sentence. Then later, if possible after some time has passed, I read through the result, again keeping my mind as "relaxed" or open as possible, allowing it to try out the possibilities and select the combination that seems most appropriate.

Then I do the same with a whole paragraph, to see that the subtle links between sentence and sentence are in order. This process, inevitably, throws up certain words or phrases that stick out as "wrong" — refuse to fit in — and here one has to search for an alternative: a word or phrase that makes the whole context fall into place yet also — judging from one's experience and the evidence of dictionaries — is within the acceptable range of nuances for the word or phrase in question.

This may seem obvious, but what I am trying to suggest is an effort to keep one's mind in a state of flux — to get it, I suppose, to repeat the process that it went through when, innocent and as yet unprogrammed, it was trying to encompass the meanings of its own language. Personally, I find that this effort not only is conducive to genuine continuity in the finished translation but also works gradually to improve my knowledge of the language and expand and complement what the dictionaries have to say.

What is needed, in other words, is a kind of common sense: an ability to make an inspired guess on the basis of what you feel instinctively the writer — who is, after all, a fellow human being — would be wanting to say. It is precisely this type of common sense, incidentally, that I feel is most lacking in some translations from English into Japanese.

The other area in which flexibility is needed is in the effort to get into the mind of the writer, even if you feel objections to what he has to say, or feel that it does not make sense, or is repetitious.

I remember my mother once saying, in connection with the question of making a pleasant home, "I *do* think that nice things are — [a pause while she searched for the right word] *nice*." The remark could seem fatuous, but what she meant, if you think about it, was, of course: "I feel rather strongly that to have objects or furnishings of good quality or taste about a house contributes considerably to one's sense of security and well-being."

Often, what seems at first sight meaningless or illogical has a concealed meaning, or an underlying "logic of feeling," as opposed to verbal logic. And it is the duty of the translator to seek that out. Having done so, he should then, ideally, go on

to clothe the newly revealed sense in words of an obscurity equivalent to that of the original. And that leads to the—perfectly logical—conclusion that a really good translator will take a piece of exquisite nonsense and, having disassembled it and discovered its sources, reassemble it, in a different language, into nonsense of comparable exquisiteness.

Which has apparently led me into writing something close to nonsense myself; and yet the principle, I feel, remains true.

On a much more practical plane, to translate from Japanese, at least where most modern novels are concerned, requires considerable experience of Japan and its people. It is not just a question of the simple, practical cultural differences—though it helps of course to have drunk *miso* soup and shared a *kotatsu* with somebody. It also has to do with what I wrote earlier of the dependence of Japanese on context.

Earlier, my use of “context” referred mostly to the linguistic context. But it also hinted at the fact that the Japanese tend to see life in terms of—to find its meaning in—familiar patterns or moments of experience. Because of this tendency, in literature a writer seldom goes into so much detail as a Western writer would in explaining a situation or scene (there are other reasons also for this, of course). Rather, he sketches an outline, or gives indicators, and assumes that his readers will fill in the pattern. And so they will—and so, since nothing mystical is at work here, will the Western reader too, provided only he has had enough contact with the Japanese scene.

It is the same with conversation—with everyday conversation, and still more with conversations in literary works. To understand the latter well will depend partly, as I suggested earlier, on the ability to realize them as sound in the mind’s ear: to hear the tones and inflexions that the Japanese reader will infer from the context.

A non-Japanese translator can hardly hope to do that without considerable experience. Ideally, he should have eaten, got drunk, traveled, discussed, argued, quarreled, made up with, and slept with as many Japanese as possible, on a scale not given to most of us to achieve. Failing that (from the sublime to the ridiculous!), he can at least keep up with the soap operas and other TV programs. These, in fact, are ideal for study, since most of them (illustrating as they do the Japanese love of the familiar, presented with subtle variations, rather than novelty for its own sake) consist, in both situations and conversations, of a string of familiar patterns—the types of pattern that the Japanese, conversely, take a pleasure in reenacting in their own daily lives.

Looking back on what I have written, I am struck by the contrast between the relatively orderly way I have presented my conclusions and the sheer disorderliness of the process that gave birth to them—the messy pages of handwriting covered with corrections that, a week later, I could scarcely read myself; the unsatisfying

compromises; the losses of confidence; and the unfulfilled deadlines. I suppose, though, that most experience is acquired like that, and that one always tries to make one's little bit of wisdom retroactive.

I am aware, too, of the sheer anguish (well, at least for me, especially with editors breathing down my neck) of that moment of truth when, having applied the rules I have given above, I read through my draft translation and realize that it just will not do as it stands.

The truth is, that in speaking or writing one's own language what I have called the computer of the brain is furiously at work all the time, calculating and adjusting, so that even if one's native speech is "uneducated," it still has its own rightness and inevitability. Translating is different; however one tries to keep one's mind flexible, it is impossible to achieve the same degree of naturalness, because what one has written has, ultimately, been put together under the influence of another tongue and someone else's brain. So there always remains the hardest work of all: the effort to bridge the gap between what you have written and a prose that reads smoothly and naturally in its own right.

But translation has its rewards as well as its anguish, at least for me. Occasionally, I have felt that I have done a job reasonably well, which is pleasant. More important, the constant effort to analyze language helps in the end to strip the mind of a lot of its lumber. Your attitude to a quite different culture—and thus your own—is constantly called into question, and prevented from becoming rigid, by the effort to get to grips with the verbal products of each. The analysis of meaning leads to the analysis of the meaning of meaning, and so off into familiar metaphysical realms. And the awareness of the processes and pitfalls of verbal communication gradually helps you to a better understanding of human relationships. Provided, of course, that it does not make you quite impossible to live with in the process.