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Gianluca Sorrentino

INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING JAPANESE: A CONTRIBUTION TO ENSURE A SOUND RENDITION

ABSTRACT. Translating from Japanese poses many challenges in terms of rendition and cultural adaptation. This research paper, inspired by professional practice and teaching, will present some translation cases taken from real cases. Its aim is to shed light on strategies assuring a sound rendition as well as faithfulness to the source text (ST) and accuracy. Translators and interpreters need to put in place those strategies to have their translation sound flawless and natural. In doing so, they need to strike the right balance between the peculiarities of a language with SOV order, rich in imagery and where emotions mingle with tradition, strong respect for one's feelings and the other.

What is really at stake in such translation cases is a well-balanced relationship with the other, the need to deeply understand and interpret thoughts, a given *Weltanschauung* as well as the values people attach to social relations, life in the modern society and respect for old traditions.

In order to accomplish this task, interpreters and translators do also need to leave apart their Western self-centered traditions and cultural background and start to embrace an open exchange of views and ideas, based on deep-rooted Zen, Buddhist and Shinto beliefs. Interpreting is not about conveying words, it stands out as a time

and energy-demanding task and is all the more difficult when it comes to transferring ideas and thoughts originating beyond the extent of our collective imagination.

Key words: Source text (ST), Weltanschauung, Traditions, Respect for the Other, Imagery.

1. Introduction

Translation – both written and oral – is a demanding, energy-consuming task. In his "tightrope hypothesis", Daniel Gile (1999) used to describe it as a set of at least three efforts:

- listening (L)
- production (P)
- (short-term) memory (M)

Skilled translators are called on to combine the three efforts and strike the right balance between comprehension and production. Gile goes on saying: «[…] l'énergie donnée est répartie entre l'écoute, la mémoire et la production en état "d'équilibre d'interprétation"».[1]

[1] D. Gile, *Le modèle d'efforts et l'équilibre d'interprétation en interprétation simultanée*, "Meta", XXX, 1, 1985, pp 44-48. The translation into English of the quotation is an humble contribution of mine: «the energy is divided between listening, memory and production to assure a sound balance in (text/speech) interpretation». Text/Speech is not present in the French original essay.

Since translation does not only rely on high cognitive skills but also on cross-cutting competencies, drawing on culture, philosophy, literature, this paper will try to shed light on the influence that cultural backgrounds and cultural relevance may have on the overall rendition by a translator or an interpreter. If the aim is to preserve the authenticity of a text – a genuine product from a foreign culture –, on the other hand translators need to come to terms with cultural gaps and provide target language speakers (TL) with a text drafted accurately. In doing so, translators and interpreters strive hard to reach a balance between preserving the sensitiveness of the source language (SL) and building bridges between SL and TL speakers.

Translation poses other challenges, too. This essay, which focuses on three short cases of written and oral translation from Japanese, shows how issues deeply intertwined with SL aesthetics and cultural traditions affect the overall rendition. Translators need to take such issues – how people view life in a given community, sensitivity towards nature and love, relationship between poetry and life/nature – into account. Where poetry takes over life and only a fine line can be drawn between art and real life, translators are called on to melt down theory and practice and move like tightropes between SL and TL cultures.[2]

This essay will show how this is put into practice, starting from three short translation cases and will start a critical analysis of the results achieved. While case

[2] D. Keene, *Japanese Aesthetics*, "Philosophy East and West", XIX, 3, July 1969, pp. 293-306.

n.1 introduces the reader in the realm of Japanese cultural traditions, case n.2 deals with recent products of poetry and literature turned into manga. From the widely known *haiku* or 俳句, a short three-line poetry with a 5-7-5 syllable structure brought to renewal by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), to the current mix of pop culture and classical literature, translators are called on to master ancient rituals and "cosplay" (modern male and female characters found in *manga* and *anime*)[3] in contemporary Japan. In case n.3, a short liaison interpreting (LI) excerpt centered around people's daily needs, the focus is again on cultural relevance and on the need to resort to adaptation and adjustments to TL – in terms of both register and style – so that the utterances produced by the Japanese speaker do not sound vague or hypocritical. Interpreters, like translators, fill the vacuum left by the code-switching and make full use of prior knowledge (PK), short- and long-term memory (STM vs LTM), in addition to facing high speech rate (SR).

2. Case 1: how to face Japanese culture before translating it.

The Japanese writer Kenzaburō Ōe held an acceptance speech in 1994 on the occasion of the Nobel Prize award for Literature, in which he stressed to need to go beyond those clichés surrounding the Japanese imagery. In particular, he emphasized the need not to build images of Japan upon a Western perspective. The writer must

[3] While *manga* refers to a comic, *anime* is a word used in Japanese to refer to computer animation.

have referred to what Edward Said had stated in 1978 about "orientalism" as a way of defining our understanding of the East.[4] Kenzaburō Ōe upholds Said's view that Western readers should dismiss their attempt of investigating the other from their cultural perspective. When the Japanese writer reported his way of approaching and defining the East, another major book was being published: *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Huntington 1996). The focus is once again on the need to take a more sober view of power relations, granting every Country the right to actively participate in the world cultural debate. Huntington was trying to avoid dismissing one's own cultural heritage in favor of the strongest political or military Countries. In particular, Japan, a Country cut off from the rest of the world, had suffered a long-standing isolation. After 1868, Japan undertake – in the Meiji or Restauration Period (1868-1912) – a set of reforms to modernize the Country and keep up with the most industrialized Countries. This meant that in a couple of decades Japan would not only catch up but also become a world leader. The consequences of this "acceleration" are described in Ōe's major works where he sheds light on the vagueness and ambiguity that Japanese have taken on since the industrialization process. As a matter of fact, their culture seems to have been deprived of its most peculiar traits to take over Euro-American values, mindset and traditions. This has in turn radically changed the face of Japan and its people.

[4] K. Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures*, Kodansha International, Tokyo 1995.

In connection with aesthetics, Kenzaburō Ōe adopts the mantra of a vague Japan (*aimaina Nihon*) opposing Yasunari Kawabata's definition of Japan as a "beautiful Country" (*utsukushii Nihon*). Kawabata, the former Nobel Prize winner, had corroborated twenty years earlier, in the eyes of Ōe, the typical definition of Japan that Western observers are used to giving.

Vagueness, ambiguity and a unique mysticism should drive the Western readers to embrace the Japanese chain of values skipping any self-centered metaphysical analysis. Translators' investigation of poetry and of a literary text should rest on the gregarious nature of the Japanese people who act as a group skipping any (mis)conception of life confined to the I. Following this approach, poetry and fiction should be built upon Japanese images of life and nature. In particular, readers and translators need to feed spiritual affinity with surrounding *mono* (things), in addition to setting their own I apart and trying to soak the spirit of words enshrined in Buddhist and Shinto roots.

One category touching on both aesthetics and philosophy is *mono no aware*, the feeling that things are not to last longer than a blink of an eye. The beauty is bound to fade away and perish. *Wabi* and *sabi* are two other categories referring to imperfection and transience. When things get lost, the onlooker is taken over by a subtle sadness deriving from the fact that s/he has sensed how precarious and uncertain life and nature are. This is the moment that counts.

In the Japanese ontology of the human being, life is not regulated by a God or a superior power that takes command of their destiny. This has a strong impact on the Western attempts to interpret the Japanese conception of life and coexistence in the society. Where men and women in the West try to recreate their own spaces and adjust them to an horizontal spacialization, Japanese people feel that spaces must accommodate those who live and share a public area, regardless of their individual taste. The chain of social values is totally upturn, attaching utmost importance to the nature as an embodiment of living spirits or *kami* worshiped in the religion of Shinto. These spirits are cherished by the Japanese people, grateful for what they receive and for their display of values and virtues. Every single (wo)man attempts to improve her/his spirit and lead by example. Overcoming the boundaries set by a transient existence in this world may be the first step.

3. Case 2: translating manga' soundtrack.

Case 2 is an analysis of Maison Ikkoku's soundtrack, *Sayonara no Dessin*. Maison Ikkoku is a *manga* series written and filmed in Japan in the early Eighties. The plot is orchestrated around the story of two young people who fall in love and try to preserve its pureness and the immanence of this vital spirit seeping through the dawn, leaves and rainfall. The translator needs to realize how the Japanese people view the beauty

of the four seasons (*kisetsu*) or how they value the vivid imagery behind the frailty of a falling leaf or a plum tree. Here is an excerpt of the soundtrack:

> *yoake no GAADOREERU ni*
> *futari koshikake*
> *BIRU kara yuutsu sou ni*
> *noboru asa hi miru*
>
> *in the dawn, on a guardrail*
> *two persons are sitting,*
> *they see with melancholy*
> *the sun rising from the buildings*
> […]
>
> *naze… ima… kimi… kaze…*
> *me to… me de… tada… SAYONARA*
> *naze… ima… boku… ame…*
> *futo… mune… yume… nurete hikaru*
>
> *why… now… you… the wind…*
> *the glance… in the glance… only… goodbye*
> *why… now… me… the rain…*
> *suddenly… heart... a dream... is wet in the light*
> […]

People in love are here surrounded by a mist, a sense of mysterious vitality which trickles down the *mono* (things) the two lovers run across. In translating the text, the linguist is called on to "rethink" the original, trying to overcome the constraints set by assonance in syllables 1-3 or the power of Japanese monosyllables. Symbols of the national identity like the wind (*kaze*) or the plum tree are preserved and turn up in the English rendition. Slight changes in syntax and cultural adaptation are provided in the first paragraph to make the TL text sound more natural: "the sun rising from the buildings".

The translator tries to recreate a plain text, preserving the succinct sentence structure in SL. The focus is and remains on the nature, not on the two lovers. One only subject (*they*) occurs in TL and is reported in the first paragraph, second rhyme. However intriguing and complex the setting, the translator decides to separate subjectivity from objectivity and nature. As the scholar Megumi Yama puts it, considerable differences are to be found in the way Japanese and Western people view their relationship with the I. She sketches out some of the main differences between the Self and Ego:

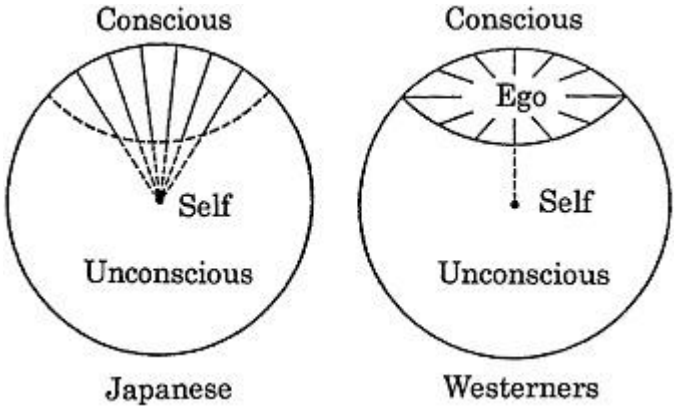

Figure 1: Megumi Yama, *Self and Ego*

In connection with the increasing attention received by manga, Giorgio Amitrano states that it is not the *manga* itself, a product of the pop culture, to attract scholars and the general public but the values embedded in it. *Manga* epitomize a cultural revolution which has sparked and taken over the Japanese world – and subsequently the West – in the last three or four decades. *Manga* have stood the test thanks to the

producers' ability of connecting *joie de vivre* and pleasure with subtle poetry and literary display of taste. In doing so, the cultural industry has come to admit the big proportion of the phenomenon, accepting it as a new cultural product, far from old stereotypes and clichés surrounding pop, *otaku* fandom and other formats targeting young people. This cultural revolution has grandly affected the body of rules prescribed by the literary circuits. Again, it is (human) nature and the way people interact with it that deserves utmost attention.

J-culture has definitely introduced a shift, a new paradigm, making post-modernism more acceptable and part of the cultural production.[5] Tradition starts to go hand in hand with ultra-modernism, East with West, samurai with cosplay characters. With this in mind, the only tool translators can adopt is adaptation of SL texts and products to the sensitiveness and traditions of TL audience. This is what the Japanese themselves have done in the cartoon strips' industry, using Western characters to bring traditions and customs closer to the Japanese collective imagination.

Toshio Miyake has conducted sociological studies on the impact that the Western fashion and its products have had on the Japanese cultural industry, concluding that the Japanese have started to mix their way of living with projections of items and gadgets from the West.[6] This "self-orientalism" settles in the East as in the West,

[5] M. Casari, *Culture del Giappone contemporaneo*, Tunué, Latina 2011.

[6] Toshio Miyake, *Beyond 'the West' and 'the East': Towards Critical Occidentalism Studies*, Conferenza, Kyoto University, Japan 2016.

with many youngsters building images of Japan centered on *manga* and on their characters, oblivious that these products are fabricated for end-users abroad.

If translation is to comply with standards set by the cultural industry, it becomes hard for it to provide high-quality rendition into the TL. Translating soundtracks and *manga* or *haiku* turned into manga is unlikely to take place, unless translation *stricto sensu* is set apart and the end-product is intended as a remake. In that case, changes in syntax and semantic patterns are not what really counts, leaving room for phantasy and imagination.

Last but not least, no translation of the soundtrack has been performed into Italian on the assumption that a word by word rendition would have not caught the attention of the TL audience, putting at risk the commercial success of the cartoon strip itself and/or of the *anime* Maison Ikkoku (animated version).

4. Case 3: interpreting out of Japanese. Focus on culture and technicalities.

This short case study is focused on a liaison interpreting (LI) test conducted during Academic Year 2013/2014 at UNINT University in Rome. Interpreters, who were asked to provide translation in both language combinations, made the utmost to assure great accuracy, faithfulness to the original content and cultural relevance.

This interpreting case posed challenges relating to the high speed delivery rate, real time and concurrent external factors such as STM, working environment, sound

quality, etc. In spite of this, both interpreters could translate all the original utterances and keep up with SL speech delivery. Here is an excerpt:

> あ、そうそう。日本人は評価によって、２０１４年に１２，０００人イタリアに来た。日本人は、イタリア語は話せないのでホテル来て、空港に来てもらった情報をわかりません。それでは、案内人があったことがいいです。案内人があれば、日本の観光客は電車で都市にこれる。その上に多くの日本人はイタリアの食事を食べないので、洋式昼食が好きないでもないが、食べ物が違って、野菜とか果物か牛乳をごちそうすることがいいです。この情報はほうこうにあげれば、日本の観光客はイタリアで休暇がまったく楽しみます。

Translation into Italian:

> *Sì, debbo dire che si sono registrate per l'anno 2014 ben 12.000 presenze giapponesi in Italia.// […]*
> *Poi un altro problema che vorrei sottolineare è che i giapponesi spesso hanno abitudini alimentari diverse, e questo problema si presenta già a colazione, e non è che a loro non piaccia la cucina italiana, però sarebbe indispensabile che i giapponesi trovassero anche dei cibi, delle vivande più vicine alla loro cultura alimentare, a colazione per esempio.// Ovviamente i giapponesi hanno abitudini alimentari diverse rispetto agli occidentali, seguono un regime alimentare diverso, per cui si potrebbe venire loro incontro inserendo nella colazione del mattino alcuni cibi che vanno dalle insalate alla frutta, dalla frutta al latte. E questa potrebbe essere una buona soluzione.// […]*

In this context, the two interpreters report that they were performing as tightropes, trying to assure an accurate translation of the original sentences and paying utmost attention to each other's turn of phrase. Any lack of language sensitivity might have slightly changed the meaning of some culture-bound information. Both interpreters have worked hard to soften the tone of some utterances. The Italian interpreter needs to work through and embellish the remark made by the Japanese representative of a Tourist Association: the lack of street signs is misleading and prevents the Japanese tourists from reaching the city centre effortlessly. On the other side, the Japanese

interpreter needs to inform that, however tasteful and rich in food, the breakfast should offer more fruit and vegetables. In both turns of phrase the two interpreters attempt to make the SL utterance appear as smooth as possible. In particular, the Italian translation is rich in delicacy and circumlocutions, sometimes adding more emphasis on contents than on the Japanese tourists' needs. If this turn of phrase proves critical from the translator's viewpoint, the TL listener receives a clear message and does not find anything odd in the original.

Megumi Yama reports that «seen culturally and historically, modern consciousness is an achievement in Western society» (Yama 2013, p. 52). Nonetheless, as Toshio Kawai puts it, this consciousness, because of the globalization, «seems to have spread all over the world».[7] This means that every citizen needs to bring along a bit of his/her cultural background and native identity. With this in mind, the two interpreters attempt to preserve the main traits of the speaker's psychology and the *esprit* of the words uttered, fully aware that, albeit appreciating differences may lead to a deeper understanding of the counterpart, in a formal context like the one described in the case study a literal translation might result in serious misunderstandings.

Considering that translation is a set of concurrent "efforts" (Gile) but it is not confined to Listening, Production and Memory, the interpreter's task has relied on

[7] T. Kawai, *Postmodern consciousness in psychotherapy*, "Journal of Analytical Psychology", 51, 2006, pp. 437-450.

conveying information inferred from a context, without setting apart its cultural relevance. This substratum nourished by secular traditions and systems of thought can hardly ever be overlooked in favour of the mere semantic accuracy. Again culture and language go hand in hand.

5. Conclusions

The *fil rouge* of the three short case studies presented in this essay is the hard work translators need to do when they face languages and cultures as complex as Japanese. If translating as a process is an attempt to build bridges between people with different socio-political and cultural backgrounds, the core problem lies in acquiring deeper knowledge of them before engaging in an analysis vis à vis the text. The third step focusing on the relationship between L1 and L2 text/speech puts emphasis on the need to master technicalities and nuances. In all cases, translating proves to be a highly demanding intellectual activity, dispelling the myth that a perfect command of two or more languages is tantamount to providing accurate linguistic mediation.

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