

Discussed: obligations, cadence, cultural trade deficits, displacement, religious food chain, aesthetics, silence, friendship, intentions, grace

and Loyalties: A Dialogue on Translation

By Andrew Becraft and Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson

FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON In translations, meanings are always skewed just a bit. Context is largely lost. In addition, nuances, rhythm, and the sounds of the original language are also all inevitably lost. Translation, then, is an art of approximation.

I think translation requires one to soak up a bit of the source language, if only to hear the lilt and music of that particular language.

BECRAFT For me, the success or failure of any translation depends entirely on whether or not the translator has met his or her obligations. The obligations of a technical translator are clear—convey the information, without regard to the diction or cadence of the original. Things get a bit trickier for those of us who've tried our hand at translating literature. Is our obligation to the author? To our own readers? To art?

Ultimately, translation is a matter of divided loyalties. For example, loyalty to art may come into conflict with loyalty to accuracy. Overcoming these conflicts and balancing divided loyalties can be just as much a creative act as the original writing process itself.

FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON And just as significant is the translator's struggle between loyalty to the source language and to the target language. The translator stands between two languages and works as a transfer medium.

"Good"—or perhaps "diplomatic"—translators try their best to stay in that space between languages, because once loyalty shifts primarily to one language or the other, translation risks becoming a form of imperialism or otherwise dispossession.

As a form of cultural trade, the import-export of translation must go both ways. English literature is widely exported into other languages. Amazon.com's Japan site, for example, is categorized between Western literature and Japanese literature. Translations of *The DaVinci Code* and *Who Moved My Cheese?* are readily available on bookshelves elsewhere in the world.

BECRAFT This isn't always the case here in America, though. Even as the world becomes more connected and interdependent, it seems that America becomes more and more isolated. The "cultural trade deficit" seems to grow with each mystery novel, each action movie, each music video, and with each foreign policy decision by the President.

FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON At the same time, within our borders, we are seeing what might be called “displaced writing.” In the recent issue of *Poetry* (page 67), translator Aleksandar Hermon comments on Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinovic, who writes in Bosnian while living here in America. “If the central event of your life and poetry is displacement, your story—and your poem is entirely different,” he says. “A displaced voice can never sound smooth.” Mehmedinovic’s poetry, as the work of a displaced person, includes “losses and absences, [and] discontinuities in the language.”

Translation, it would seem to me, is itself a type of displacement. It takes a work out of its contextual home and places it in a foreign setting among readers who may not necessarily understand its references and cultural markers. To a degree, it then changes the work itself.

BECRAFT Look at what happens in a translation between languages with little in common, such as English and Japanese. Japanese authors have at their disposal not one but four scripts—*kanji* (characters derived from Chinese); *hiragana* and *katakana* (two phonetic systems); and Latin or “Roman” script.

The potential for visual expression is wholly lost when translated to a language like English, as are allusions present in homophones. Representing Japanese homophones phonetically (instead of with *kanji*) can introduce interesting allusions that are absent from an English translation. Cultural context is similarly lost between the two languages, unless the translator inserts explanations or otherwise modifies the text in translation.

I think this is why so many translations from Japanese sound stereotypically “Asian.” Something that could just as easily be translated “I’m glad I could help you” is too often interpreted “It is with honor that I accept the responsibility of serving you,” generally followed by a loud gong. You really must know both the language and the culture intimately in order to avoid making Japanese appear like an alien “other.” Knowing a few people is just not enough.

FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON To understand the language is to understand the culture and vice versa. The Japanese language is, at one glance, grammatically simplistic. Often, there’s no distinction between singular and plural. Implied subjects abbreviate sentences. Verb tenses are mixed rather freely, because as one native Japanese speaker explained to me, verb tenses don’t always represent time. It is a language of aesthetics.

BECRAFT Under the surface, Japanese is a very complex language that contains an elaborate structure based on levels of politeness. In communication, one chooses among three main levels of politeness—*kudaketa* or *futsu* (plain), *teinei* (polite), and *keigo* (advanced polite)—according to his/her status in relationship to the other person.

FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON Then there is veiled meaning. What is left unspoken is sometimes as meaningful as what is spoken. To really understand Japanese, one must learn to listen in the space between words, to silence that is often foreign to the Western ear.

However, translation is not only a linguistic tool, but also a life tool. We’re all translators. Everything we see, read, live, and understand comes to us through the filters of our personal histories, belief systems, and hopes. Just as with translation, we create of life an imperfect approximation based on what we understand. People of faith are translators of faith standing between faith and non-faith, between the Bible and the world.

Believers of all religions have often mistaken religion for a food chain, and everyone believes his/her belief system is at the top. Perhaps a little translation would be in order. If we could recognize that the God of our translation is not necessarily supreme—that he himself changes form in translation—he is, after all, both the familiar *tu* of the French language and the God of deferential terms of the Japanese language—then perhaps we might find other (less divisive, less violent) methods of hashing out our differences.

The beauty—and value—in translation is that it allows us to expand our understanding of universals in humanity. Much like love or parenting or friendship, it’s riddled with imperfection, miscommunication, and inevitable loss, but also with immeasurable value. Translation is a very human act, and when carried out with good intentions, I think it can carry with it a bit of grace.

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