STYLES IN TRANSLATING JAPANESE LITERATURE

— A comparative study of three different translations of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s “Kesa to Moritō”¹ —

by TAKURO IKEDA

The poorness of written English of us Japanese seems notorious enough among native writers of English. Mr. Arthur Waley, who has done a tremendous service in introducing Japanese literature to the English-speaking world, is said to have told Mr. Abe Tomoji something to the effect that we Japanese had better stop writing English, when the Japanese novelist visited England in 1949. Mr. Seidensticker in denouncing our written English in an article a few years ago compared it to our old, self-satisfying practice of composing Chinese poems in the Tokugawa and earlier periods and declared that the including of Japanese-English translations in the college entrance examinations was absurd, because the Japanese teachers who prepared the problems could not themselves write good English. Dr. Donald Keene in a radio interview at the occasion of World’s Pen Club Conference held in Tokyo in 1957 testified that there were in all the world only five or six persons who could translate Japanese literature into tolerably good English.

It is to be regretted that, hard as I have tried, I have been unable to locate records of those remarks, which are quoted only from my memory. With some allowances for that lack of documentary support, it is certain that we Japanese teachers of English ought to take these testimonies to be a timely challenge to our professional conscience and work out some practicable solutions. This study, a “statistical approach” by quantitative analyses referred to by George Miller in Style in Language,² is a small attempt to discover some of them.

Attitudes in translation

Regarding the problem of what attitude would be the most desirable in the area of translation, various opinions and viewpoints have been voiced by scholars and critics interested. Although discussion of this problem is not my primary concern here, this much is clear: a translator of Japanese literature cannot neglect to define his attitude in what manner
of style he is to write before actually starting on the task. From the very beginning he is confronted with a problem—should he aim at a faithful translation of the original at the sacrifice of readability; or, should he consider above all the readability of his English aiming toward native English readers?

Personally I am rather skeptic of the use of the so-called faithful translation. Mr. Seidensticker, who has turned out many excellent translations of Japanese literature, asserts in a very valuable article entitled, “Problems in Japanese-English Translation” that:

I think in translating Japanese into English, literal translation is by no means possible. . . . The Japanese people seem to think that their language may be distorted in bringing Japanese and English closer. But unfortunately Americans and Englishmen have different opinions. In order to write good English we have to distort the real meaning of Japanese. That is why there is no translation style in English. I do not suppose there will be one in future, either.3

In the “Preface” of his Style, F. L. Lucas says: “A style, like a person, may be perfectly correct, yet perfectly boring or unbearable.”4 We could read “A translation” for “A style” here. Perhaps a literal translation is worse than one which takes more liberty with the text. What is meant is that a faithful, unreadable translation may do more damage to the favorable reception abroad of the original work than one written in good, readable English, although incorrect in some points.

Once rendered into English, a work of Japanese literature should perhaps be regarded to have become a work of English literature in a sense. At least that was the case with Mr. Waley’s excellent translation of Genji Monogatari. In other words, only a translation done in such readable English as to be considered good enough for a work of English literature will be accepted by the Anglo-American reading public. Our translating of Japanese literature into English should be done, not with the aim of driving the English-reading audience’s interest away from it, but in the hope of attracting their interest to it. A translation of a short story should be readable as a short story. It ought to be executed in the literary style of today, not in the journalistic or editorial style, much less in the style of research papers.

When the American playwright Tennessee Williams visited this country in 1959 he was reported to have expressed his keen interest in Japanese literature. According to the 1959 November issue of Eigo Seinen Williams pointed out the importance of the translator saying that because there were good translations available, Japanese writers like Mishima,
Dazai, and Ōoka were read by Americans with interest. What style, then, will safely pass in an English short story of today?

Texts studied

"Kesa to Moritō," one of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short stories deriving their themes from the period of the Heian dynasty, has been rendered into English by three different translators—one American, Mr. Howard Hibbett, and two Japanese scholars, namely, Professor Kojima Takashi of Meiji University, and Dr. Matsumoto Ryōzo. Of the three translations, Professor Kojima's is the earliest, and next appeared Mr. Hibbett's attempt and lastly Dr. Matsumoto's. To my thinking there can be detectable in Mr. Hibbett's rendition traces of borrowing, conscious or unconscious, from Professor Kojima's excellent work. And, if we may hazard a bold hypothesis, Mr. Hibbett may have tried his own version out of his dissatisfaction with the work by Professor Kojima.

What stylistic alterations are to be seen in Mr. Hibbett's version?

Analyses of Sentences

1) Length

To begin with, the number of the sentences and words in each translation were counted. The four-lined ballad was excluded from consideration. Table 1 shows the results of the counting.

It is natural that the original Japanese sentences are reduced in number when turned into English. Translating entire original sentences would produce a reading too tedious for English-speaking people. The technique of omission of details unessential from the Anglo-American viewpoint is one of the important requirements for a successful translation. How should we take then the fact that Hibbett's version has a slightly greater number of sentences than the other two? It must be due to the fact that his sentences are shorter and more numerous. Generally speaking, Mr. Hibbett readily cuts an original sentence into two shorter ones, when the Japanese translators leave it as a longer one.

Let me illustrate. As is seen below he cuts into three the very opening sentence of the story, which is one both in the original and the two other versions, thereby attaining a crisp, powerful effect to start with. This crisp, racy quality makes up one of the major characteristics of Mr. Hibbett's style, the other being its facile readability.

The Original:  Yoru, Moritō ga tsuiji no soto de, tsukishiro o nagame nagara, ochiba o funde mono-omoi ni fukette iru.

Hibbett: Night. Moritō gazes at the new-risen moon, as he
walks through dead leaves lying outside a wall. He is lost in thought.

Kojima: Looking at the moon in a pensive mood, Morito walks on the fallen leaves outside the fence of his house.

Matsumoto: It is night, Moritō is lost in thought on the far side of an ornamental garden hill, treading upon the fallen leaves and looking up at the lurid sky just before moonrise.

As to the average sentence length, we find Mr. Hibbett's sentences are remarkably short. When I first read Dr. Matsumoto's work, I felt his sentences were rather long-winded, but what emerges is never too extreme, perhaps due to the fact that their movement is varied with intermixture of shorter sentences.

It has been pointed out almost unanimously by scholars and critics that modern English sentences tend to be considerably shorter than those of former days. P. G. Perrin, for instance, says in his *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, "In current writing the sentences are notably shorter and more direct than they were two or three generations ago." Professor Kobayashi Chikahira in his *Eigogaku Gairon* gives the average word number of 20 in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "David Swan." Two of the students of Tamagawa University counted under my guidance John Steinbeck's novel *The Red Pony* and Sherwood Anderson's short story *Death in the Woods* and found that they both averaged 14.5 words.

All this conspicuous shortness of translated sentences on hand seems to be brought on chiefly because Akutagawa's original sentences themselves are short by Japanese standard. The story is written in monologue form, divided into two parts, one giving Moritō's soliloquy, the other Kesa's confession. As a style of monologue it has nothing of the crawling wordiness of the so-called stream of consciousness. By my computation the number of 31 letters was obtained, which is rather short as compared with the average 32 of Shiga Naoya's short story *Amagaeru*. Dr. Hatano Kanji in his *Bunshō Shinri Gaku* believes the number of the Shiga story to be one of the shortest in Japanese writing.

2) Structure

Next the sentence structures of the three versions were classified. No. 3) of Table 1 indicates the results of my research. Simple and compound and elliptical sentences were totaled because of my supposition that these three kinds of sentences could be held similar in their structural simplicity. We see Mr. Hibbett's sentences are markedly simple in their structures.
Likewise, complex and mixed sentences can be grouped in the same category because of their complexity. Dr. Matsumoto's rendering is the most complex in regard to sentence patterns.

Attention must be called to the use and meaning of the term "mixed sentence" here. Most grammars today do not adopt that term, but to my thinking it carries a more direct association with style than the more usual "compound-complex sentence." What is more important, a sentence such as: It is strange that he should say so and she should not say so. is here counted as a mixed sentence. A sentence like that is ordinarily regarded as a complex sentence, but I have ventured to take it as a mixed sentence. My reason is that, stylistically, its structure leaves an involved, mixed, impression on the reader.

It is almost indisputable that a high percentage of simple sentences makes for an easy, enjoyable reading, while that of mixed ones a hard, serious one.

Then the percentages of interrogative and exclamatory sentences on those of affirmative sentences were added. The high figure in Hibbett's version probably shows that it is variegated by these modes of different semantic effects despite the shortness and simplicity of its sentences.

Participial construction

I for one sometimes suspect that we Japanese use the participial construction too frequently. No doubt it is a very useful device of expression. But that usefulness might involve mannerism of emasculated writing. Ernest Hemingway's famed short story The Killers begins with this sentence:

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. We are struck with the rhythm. Let us suppose that it were written in our favorite participial construction:

Opening the door of Henry's lunch-room two men came in. Most of the original, dramatic vividness is lost.

The figures in Sub-item h) manifest that the American translator does not write so often in this construction as do his Japanese colleagues.

Passive voice

The frequent employment of the passive voice is another peculiarity of our Japanese English. William Strunk's The Element of Style is a small booklet, but was highly praised by The New Yorker and Time magazines a few years ago. What are prescribed by the author in this unpretentious booklet are believed to coincide with the stylistic traits of the so-called
hard-boiled school.

Under the heading of "Use the active voice," Professor Strunk has these remarks:

The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive: 
... The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing. This is true not only in narratives principally concerned with action, but with writing of any kind. He then gives an extreme example:

It was not long before he was very sorry that he said what he said.

His alternative is:

He soon repented his words.

Strunk comments on the above example: "Note, in the examples above, that when a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter. Thus brevity is a by-product of vigor."11

Impersonal construction

At the end of my sentence analyses, how many sentences in impersonal construction there were in these translations was seen. By impersonal construction here only the "it . . . to" or "it . . . that" construction is meant. Other impersonal constructions starting with the pronoun "it" denoting the weather, time, etc. were not considered. This construction, we know, frequently appears in writings of formal style, for example, in newspaper editorials and academic papers. It is greatly doubted, however, if it has an effective place in narrative or description in stories and novels. It seems that in a work of literature it is weakening because it is impersonal. Perrin says:

In general, sentences beginning 'It is . . .' or 'It was . . .' are wordy and weakening, since they have put a colorless phrase in the emphatic beginning of the sentence.

He then shows an illustration of an impersonal construction:

It was then that his wife had taken to going with other men.

This could be improved into:

Then his wife had taken to going with other men.12

As I read Dr. Matsumoto's translation, I noticed there were more impersonal construction than in the Hibbett version. The figures in Sub-item j) justify my impression and if we add to them other clauses headed by "that," both relative pronoun and conjunction, their percentages on the respective number of sentences become as shown in the item just below. We may be safe in assuming that these that-clauses in a short story or a novel will help to create with their heavy ring a serious mood rather than an easy,
crisp tone. Propriety of letting a woman speak in those heavy-sounding that-clauses is, to my thinking, a little questionable.

As is found on the line still below, 9.90% of the Hibbett version is made up of 7.92% in Part One in which Morito pours forth his soliloquy, and of 1.98% in Part Two in which Kesa, the adulteress, tells her story. It is clear that Mr. Hibbett is very sparing in his use of that-clauses in the woman's confession while Dr. Matsumoto's approach is the opposite.

Repetition

What appears to me still another of the peculiarities of our Japanese English is its repetitious nature. In H. W. Fowler's marvelous Modern English Usage, there is a very readable article written in the lexicographer's usual racy, piquant style, entitled, "Repetition of words or sounds." In it Fowler has this to say:

The fact remains, however, that repetition of certain kinds is bad; &, though the bad repetitions are almost always unintentional, & due to nothing worse than carelessness, & such as their authors would not for a moment defend, yet it is well that writers should realize how common this particular form of carelessness is; . . .

Dependent sequences, i.e., several of phrases, or two or more which clauses or that clauses or -ly words, each of which is not parallel or opposed, but has a dependent relation, to the one before or after it.13

In reading the renditions by the Japanese scholars my particular attention was drawn to the repetitious quality of their sentences and expressions. In Dr. Matsumoto's translation three sentences modified by when-clauses occur close together with two sentences in between. He uses the participial construction more often than the other two translators, and then it appears in succession in three sentences:

Looking back on it now, I feel as though I were retracing a memory blurred in the remote past. I only remember that, while I was sobbing, Morito's moustache suddenly touched my ear and he whispered in a low voice, breathing warmly, "Let's kill Wataru". Hearing this, strangely enough, I felt brighter.14

Qualities of Words and Phrases

Here again a lack of variety in expression due to repetitions of the same words and phrases in Japanese English is felt. What seems a pertinent instance occurs in the fourth paragraph of the story. As is given in No. 2) of Table 2 Professor Kojima and Dr. Matsumoto are persistent in their use of the word "love," the former in its verb form, the latter in its noun form. In Hibbett's version the dogged repetition of "love" in the
same part of speech is avoided.

-**ly** adverbs

It is suspected that the use of too many adverbs ending in *-ly* will weaken the effect of our sentences. Fowler in the dictionary mentioned before is loud in denouncing repetition of the *-ly* adverbs.

It was said in the article "Jingles" that the commonest form of ugly repetition was that of the *-ly* adverbs. It is indeed extraordinary, when one remembers the feats of avoidance performed by the elegant-variationist, the don't-split-your-infinitivist, and the anti-preposition-at-ender, to find how many people have no ears to hear this most obvious of all outrages on euphony.\(^1\)

Here Fowler is attacking the use of the *-ly* adverbs in direct contact as in "practically completely." And we find no similar ugly jingles in our translations at hand. Yet let us listen to what Perrin in his *Guide and Index* has to say:

> Many of the longer adverbs are unemphatic because they are unstressed toward the end, and when two or more of them come close together they make a clumsy or unpleasant sounding phrase. The repetition of the *-ly* is especially enfeebling.\(^1\)

Mr. Seidensticker also in the article already referred to complains about how adverbs in Japanese are the hardest to put into natural English.\(^1\)

Seven of Dr. Matsumoto's 192 sentences are modified by two *-ly* adverbs, whereas in the Hibbett translation, there are only two of such sentences. The percentages on the total number of sentences are given in No. 2. c) of Table 2. The adverb "only" was not included because of its terseness.

Latin words

Besides the repetitious character of Japanese English the not infrequent appearance of words of Latin origin in the translations of the Japanese scholars, especially in Dr. Matsumoto's, cannot escape notice. The Latin words having more than three syllables were counted, and we have the resulting percentages on the total words in No. 3) of Table 2.

When we see Marjorie Boulton cheerfully castigate:

> Unfortunately, the inexperienced reader can sometimes be deceived by shoddiness and value a spurious, slovenly pseudo-ornamentation more than a vigorous simplicity. This is not a fault much to be blamed in the inexperienced; small children love long words for their impressive sound and the love of decoration has led to much human art; taste develops later than creativeness.\(^18\)

we wish to be older than twelve in the business of English composition.
Conclusion

With all these findings it seems safe to conclude that the peculiarities of the sentences written by the Japanese translators, so far as these two translations are concerned, are long in length, complicated, impersonal and heavy in structure, unvarying and rather tame in semantic effects, while the sentences of their American counterpart are short, simple, personal, light, varied and forcible. Their repetitious quality and Latinism also make them both heavy and serious reading. It is conjectured from these facts that if we Japanese want to write English sentences of an easy style, we should keep them short, simple, and forcible. We should avoid monotonous repetition in sentence structures and expressions. And perhaps we should not use too many heavy-sounding Latin words.

Finally a word may be added by way of a proposal on the teaching of English composition in this country. It is my opinion that we ought to train our boys and girls, as well as ourselves, in writing more sentences of simpler structure than we do at present. Our English sentences lack the native rhythm and movement, due to the fact that we hastily go ahead and try to write in complicated structures.

We ought to have more textbooks that are compiled from the standpoint of sentence structures. Most of the composition textbooks available today are arranged according to topics, not to structures, including, if it may be pointed out, the one just recently published by this very Association.

Notes

1. This is a revised form of a paper read at the Third Annual Conference of Japan Association of Current English held at Dōshisha University, Kyōto, in October, 1962.
6. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Kesa to Moritō," *Jigokuhen, Jashūmon,*
Kôshoku, Yabunonaka and Seven Others, "The Iwanami Library," (Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo; 1962)—(O).
11. Ibid., p. 13.
17. Seidensticker, 7.

Analyses of Sentences:
1) Numbers: (H)—202, (K)—190, (M)—192, (O)—217
2) Average Lengths: (H)—12.1 words, (K)—14.9, (M)—15.9, (O)—31 letters
3) Structural Percentages:
   a) Simple Sentences: (H)—45.04%, (K)—44.21, (M)—38.54
   b) Compound Ss.: (H)—7.92, (K)—3.68, (M)—6.77
   c) Elliptical Ss.: (H)—5.94, (K)—0.53, (M)—2.08
      Total (Simple): (H)—58.90, (K)—48.42, (M)—47.39
   d) Complex Ss.: (H)—24.75, (K)—28.94, (M)—30.20
   e) Mixed Ss.: (H)—16.33, (K)—22.63, (M)—22.39
      Total (Complex): (H)—41.08, (K)—51.57, (M)—52.59
   f) Interrogative Ss.: (H)—12.87, (K)—9.47, (M)—10.41
   g) Exclamatory Ss.: (H)—6.43, (K)—4.21, (M)—2.08
      Total: (H)—19.30, (K)—13.68, (M)—12.49
   h) Participial Construction: (H)—3.46, (K)—5.79, (M)—9.04
   i) Passive Voice: (H)—7.43, (K)—16.32, (M)—16.21
j) Impersonal Construction: (H)—2.97, (K)—5.79, (M)—8.86
k) That-clauses: (H)—9.90, (K)—20.00, (M)—22.91
(made up of): (7.92+1.98), (14.74+5.26), (14.06+8.85)

Table 1

Qualities of Words & Phrases:
1) Numbers of Words: (H)—2444, (K)—2826, (M)—3050
2) Repetitions:
   a) Verb or Nouns: (H)—love Kesa / in love with her / my love / in love / my later love / love Kesa /
      (K)—love Kesa / Loved her / my love toward her / to love her / love her / love her /
      (M)—in love with her / the love between Kesa and myself / in love with her / my love / my so-called love / to make love to her / loving her / in love with Kesa
   b) -ly Adverbs: (H)—1.11%, (K)—1.38, (M)—1.64
   c) Numbers of Sentences with Two -ly Advs.: (H)—0.99%, (K)—1.58, (M)—3.65
3) Latin Words (with more than 3 syllables): (H)—2.29%, (K)—2.41, (M)—3.64

Table 2

SOME NOTEWORTHY EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH

by NOBUYOSHI OKA

There are considerably many noteworthy turns of expression in English which it is important for us Japanese to understand.

There are many causes in a change of speech habits. Our attitude should be towards the reliability of an available collection of linguistic facts, and of a careful investigation of it.

Now I’m going to explain them by the following examples.

1. I am obviously too old to take up geisha-ing.

This is in a sentence in an essay “West Now Has Geisha” by INEZ