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Translation Strategies in Praxis with Text Examples from Japanese

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Abstract: In this installment, we look at translation with some practical considerations in mind. Before starting a translation, reading the text as it is, uninterrupted, is the first step to identify for one the main topic of the text. We will also look at the context and the recurrence of certain domain-specific vocabulary to illustrate the necessity of continued development of knowledge and intelligence in translation competence and the acquisition of expertise in domain-specific fields.

Introduction

In the previous two issues (Bode, 2009a, 2009b) I have introduced the production strategies described by Andrew Chesterman in his book Memes of Translation (2007). Applying that as a basic method of consideration we can embark (the odyssey continues) here to further examine the translation strategies needed in particular with Japanese. By the following examples I would like to introduce some language specific comprehension and production strategies with respect to Japanese. With comprehension strategies as a basic starting point, the translator/interpreter can cope more easily later with temporary difficulties in the actual praxis of the work. Recognising them from preparatory readings of in-house/professional manuals (See for this, the extensive publications of Tachibana Shōbō) the translator/interpreter develops his skills and abilities. This preparatory stage can locate recurrent terms and expressions which could then be established as the basic working vocabulary of the translator/interpreter. With that working vocabulary it reduces both stress and the chances of mistakes in the end product. With production strategies the translator/interpreter has reliable tools for deciding either to omit information, to expand, or to rephrase statements. Although sometimes a literal translation or interpretation is linguistically correct in all aspects for the target language, the person addressed sometimes does not seem to understand the given information. Think, for instance, of complicated legal terminology, which the source emitter (police officer/prosecutor/judge) will most of time rephrase. As such, the interpreter will not rephrase the message on his/her own initiative, but will wait until after this simplified information has been stated by the judicial side. The interpreter, having initially noticed that the original was too difficult for the receiver (the suspect) to understand, reports this back to the source emitter.

This incident shows the importance of sufficient preparation and in the subsequent paragraphs I would like to give some examples of preparation techniques reinforced by actual experience translating/interpreting.

Reading Techniques of the Source Language (SL) Text Dealing with Judicial Matters

As a student at Leiden University one of the professors there advised us to read a Japanese text-fragment from beginning to end and try to understand the main topic of the segment before checking individual linguistic elements. This advice could be compared to what Miyamoto Musashi (1584? – 1645) advised his students to do in The Book of Five Rings, his book on Japanese swordsmanship. In its first chapter – Earth – there is the following observation of “Knowing the small by knowing the large” (see Wilson, 2001, p. 55) [大きなる所よりちいさき所を知り] (see Watanabe, 2001, p. 22), which constitutes an essential phase in comprehending the smaller details. He continues this idea in another way on the same page: “making the small into the large (see ibid)” [ちいさきを大きになすこと] (see Watanabe, 2001, p. 22).

With the following quotation from a Tachibana publication I would like to explain further reading in a wider context instead of being blinded by the smaller details, or intending to solve the smaller difficulties first. In the text fragment the term honshoku [本職] is a recurrent linguistic element used in context with other text parts.

The text fragment used here as an example is from the Handbook of Criminal Case Document Compilation for Regional Police Officers [地域警察官のための一件書類作成の手引き], by the Regional Practical Research Association, 2010, Tōkyō, Tachibana Shobō, p. 127. Copyright 2010 by Tachibana Shobō.

A summary translation is as follows:

Today, during the time that I, in my duty as a police officer, was on patrol on the road in front of [the premises located] in Tōkyō with the address [...] in the afternoon a man with the appearance of belonging to a gangster-outfit (with further physical details described), when he saw me in uniform he turned the other way and when I called him to stop to investigate this suspicious behavior he acted nervously and was not at ease. Because of this he voluntarily accompanied me to the police-outpost of [...station]. There with his consent, I inspected his personal belongings. Since there was a long, narrow object in the right pocket of his trousers, when I requested him to produce it he reluctantly took out from his pocket a fruit knife with a wooden scabbard (5 cm in length). When I asked the reasons for having it, he stated “it is for the use of protection”. Because it was not possible to establish a valid business use or other reason for having it, he was recognised as an offender in flagrant delicto (committing a crime in the presence of a police officer) violating the Minor Offense Law (Article 1, paragraph 2).

When both mono- and bilingual dictionaries are consulted three possible meanings are given. The Kenkyūsha Japanese
The entry or phrase part containing the entry honshoku appears in the sentences 1, 3, and 8 (Figure 1). The first sentence until the wavy underlined three characters (during patrolling) functions as a pronoun. In the third sentence there is a longer phrase honshoku no sugata wo mite [本職の姿を見て]; here the honshoku is used in connection with sugata. In a plain translation it could be stated as when he saw my appearance/form. From the whole context of the Japanese text itself the statement could not be anything except when he saw me in police uniform.

The wavy underlined entries or sentence phrases (see 1-2, 4, 5, 9, 10) are “indicators” of who produced the text and what general function it has. It is safe to say that even if there is only this textual part available, it would still be clear to the reader that there is a strong judicial connection. Actually, keirachū [警ら中] makes a clear indication possible. The other indicators are in sequential order:

1. ‘He is a lawyer by profession.’
2. ‘An author whose main occupation is a medical doctor.’

Translation needs to be considered in view of a context, not just by its singular linguistic elements to solve the smaller difficulties (looking from a larger perspective makes the problem/difficulty less overwhelming). In this case, 1) and 2) are options that are out of place. By performing an active use of selection and scrolling down in the dictionary list of possibilities and with due consideration of the textual and concrete context a single possible decision can be made. Words hardly have only one meaning to consider. Perhaps it is useful to learn the language on the basis of one-to-one word relation of the languages concerned initially and then gradually widen one’s vocabulary horizons. With the text above it is possible to understand how the third meaning is actually used from this contextual reading method. Basic considerations when reading such a specific text are: who wrote this text? What purpose does it have? Are there parts in the text that look irregular? Is the text composed of many specialized terms? What is the overall style of the sentences? This all constitutes either the preparatory phase of the translator/interpreter’s skills, or on the spot understanding of the textual/oral message. The ability to activate again the memory of what has been prepared then connects the comprehension strategies with the production strategies.
**Concluding Remarks**

The short vocabulary list has certain usefulness in and of itself. When seen in a wider context, however, the vocabulary here acquired will help recognition and thus efficiency in one’s work as an interpreter; for example, vocabulary would be helpful on such other occasions as when reading back testimonies and statements to suspects. Translation is in a sense more controlled because the actual text is there, but with interpretation unexpected questions and statements are more likely to occur. Having acquired the necessary vocabulary, even these unexpected occurrences can be addressed more appropriately. This facilitates a direct and concise information check, which may result in a less irritated official on the other end. Preparatory reading of source material is, in my opinion, a way to develop a translator or interpreter’s overall competence. A translator or interpreter becomes then a subject/area specialist.

**Note to the Reader**

In the next volume (Spring, 2011) I will discuss grouping close lemmata together instead of an alphabetical style employed in general dictionaries.

**References Cited**


**About the author:** Jeroen Bode has been working since 2005 for Tsukuba University as a lecturer. From 2007 he began working as an independent official translator of Japanese. His translation work led him to redirect his attention to applied language skills during the process of translating. He received his M.A. in Japanese language and culture in 1996 from Leiden University in the Netherlands.