

The self-centered mindset of Japanese and the perspective of Japanese expressions as removed from objective portrayal

Hiro UCHIYAMA*

The self-centered mindset of Japanese and the perspective of Japanese expressions paint experiences as one's own, removed from objective portrayal. This paper explores characteristic features of such aspects using Japanese and English. These include phrases from modern Japanese literature and classical Japanese poems of 31 syllables with published English translations of both. It is found that the self-centered mindset of Japanese and the perspective of Japanese expressions are likely to result in certain discrepancies between the intended meaning of original texts and their translations. In an attempt to overcome such problems, a comparative analysis of certain linguistic peculiarities in the respective languages is undertaken.

Key words: self-centered mindset, perspective of Japanese expressions

1. Introduction

The Japanese language is derived, in a complex yet subtle way, from Japan's climate, cultural background and the delicate sentiments of its people. Translations between Japanese and English which do not take into account the diverse qualities and idiosyncrasies of the former result in ambiguity and misinterpretation.

In an attempt to describe the effect of the self-centered mindset of Japanese and perspective in Japanese expressions, the following features are analyzed:

1. The obscuring of the subject. Examples from Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* and *The Izu Dancer* will be presented. It is claimed that certain English translations of these do not correspond to the intended of the original text.
2. The sequential illustration of mental and material phenomena. A poem composed by Ki no Tsurayuki in the *Kokinshu: Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poetry*¹ will be used. It is argued that the quoted English translations do not capture the focus of the original story.
3. The perceiving by the agent of effects caused by inanimate subjects in English.

2. The obscuring of the subject

The meaning of the English translations in the two examples dealt with in sections 2.1 (Uchiyama 2005, pp.3-14) and 2.2 do not correspond with that of the original text because the subject of each has been obscured.

2.1 What is the agent responsible for *nukeru*?

国境の長いトンネルを抜けると雪国であった。

Kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta.

What is the agent responsible for the action, *tonneru o nukeru*? By reading on, it appears that both a train and the protagonist have come out of the tunnel. Common sense dictates that what came out of the tunnel was the train carrying the protagonist. That is, something that transcends both subject and object came out of the tunnel. The main character then becomes aware that the Snow Country is unfolding before his eyes. This is the moment in which the main character and his surroundings become one. The character captures, with his eyes and heart, the surrounding circumstances, and from that point treats them subjectively. This is an example of a self-centred mindset, in which he interprets the events happening around him from his perspective.

* Professor, Faculty of Global Media Studies, Komazawa University

Can this unique way of grasping concepts be expressed in English? Edward Seidensticker, a scholar of Japanese literature who ranks alongside the prominent Donald Keene, translates the sentence as follows (Seidensticker, 1996, p.3):

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.
 列車は長いトンネルを出たら雪国に入った。
Ressha wa nagai tonneru o detara yukiguni ni haitta.

In this translation there are two major deviations from the original. The first reason is that “train” has been added. Seidensticker perceives that it was the train which left the tunnel. Thus, the character and his surroundings do not interact and circumstances are portrayed completely objectively. Another distortion is that *kunizakai* does not appear. It can be assumed that Kawabata placed this in front of *tonneru* for a purpose. It can be argued that there is a risk of significant deviation from the original text.

This kind of distortion is a result of differences in perspective. Kawabata’s perspective covers the circumstances that unfold from the time before the tunnel is entered, from the time the tunnel is being approached. Seidensticker’s perspective views the circumstances that unfold after leaving the tunnel. To focus on the situation after having left the tunnel emphasises the new circumstances that are unfolding and does not address the significance of the tunnel that has now disappeared. It can be assumed that in pursuit of an objective portrayal, Seidensticker intentionally ignored *kunizakai*.

A perspective which begins from the time when the tunnel is approaching includes the protagonist capturing his surrounding circumstances. In this case, the tunnel is a border beyond which he anticipates a vastly different world: the Snow Country. Thus in leaving the tunnel and traversing this border, he appreciates the anticipated change in circumstances. The tunnel symbolises the border between a world with snow and one without, and is expressed through the use of *kunizakai*. Thus we can reason that its place in the original has great significance.

This conclusion, founded on the logical series of events, can also be substantiated grammatically. This involves the roles of *to* in *nukeru to* and *ta* in *yukiguni de atta*.

2.1.1 A Japanese tourist in Australia, looking intently into the high branches of a Eucalyptus tree says excitedly:

あ！コアラがいた！
A! Koara ga ita!

Although this exclamation refers to a present situation, *ita* is used instead of *iru*. Here, *ta* expresses a hope or expectation held since some past point in time. Regardless of immediate circumstances, the situation is portrayed through a reflection on the past, for which *ta* is used. In the opening sentence of *Snow Country*, the *ta* in *yukiguni de atta* is used in a similar way and represents the preceding latent expectation that the Snow Country is beyond the long, approaching tunnel. There is a significant gap in the flow of awareness between Kawabata’s original, and Seidensticker’s translation and objective portrayal.

2.1.2 A girl is about to leave the house on some errands for her mother. Since she must cross a busy main road, her mother warns her before she leaves:

走ると危ないわよ。
Hashiru to abunai wa yo.
 You realize that when you run [across the road], you are taking a risk, don’t you?

The *to* in *hashiru to* expresses the inevitable result of the preceding condition. It indicates the causal relationship between *hashiru* and *abunai*, and the certainty of the result. Being a logical statement, the time at which the statement is made and at which the action occurs are separated. In the opening sentence of *Snow Country*, the *to* in *kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to* is used in a similar way by drawing attention to the condition prior to entering the Snow Country.

In consideration of the grammatical functions *ta* and *to* as discussed in sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 above, it can be said that an objective portrayal of the situation such as Seidensticker’s deviates from the perspective of the original text and its author.

2.2 Who was going to say good-bye?

The particle *wa* indicates that the word to which it is suffixed is already under topic and is already manifested. If the same topic is referred to in the continuing statement, that topic may be omitted

while it still functions latently. This can cause misinterpretations on the part of readers. The following passage from *The Izu Dancer* (Kawabata, p.39) will be used in investigating such difficulties.

はしけはひどく揺れた。踊子^はやはり唇をきつと閉じたまま一方をみつめていた。私が縄梯子に捉(つか)まろうとして振り返った時、さよならを言はうとしたが、それも止して、もう一べんだうなづいて見せた。はしけが帰って行った。栄吉はさっき私がやったばかりの鳥打帽をしきりに振っていた。ずっと遠ざかってから踊子が白いものを振り始めた。

Hashike ^{wa}hidoku yureta. Odoriko wa yahari kuchibiru o kitto tojita mama ippo o mitsumete ita. ^{Watashi}ga ^{Watashi}ga nawabashigo ni tsukamaro to shite furikaetta toki, sayonara o io to shita ga, sore mo yoshite, mo ippen tada unazuite miseta. Hashike ga kaette itta. Eikichi wa sakkī watashi ga yatta bakari no toriuchibo o shikirini futte ita. Zutto tozakatte kara odoriko ga shiroi mono o furihajimeta.

There are two different interpretations of the agent responsible for the underlined actions:

- (a) The lighter pitched violently. The dancer stared fixedly ahead, her lips pressed tight together. As ^I started up the rope ladder to the ship I looked back. ^I wanted to say good-bye, but I only nodded again. The lighter pulled off. Eikichi waved the hunting cap, and as the town retreated into the distance the girl began to wave something white. (Seidensticker, 1974, p.28)
- (b) The launch rocked violently. The dancing girl kept her mouth shut tight, staring at the same spot. When ^{she} grabbed the rope ladder and looked back, ^{she} tried to say good-bye but gave up and merely nodded one last time. The launch headed back to the wharf. Again and again Eikichi waved the hunting cap I had just given him. As the launch receded in the distance, the dancing girl began to wave something white. (Holman, p32)

As highlighted in the boxes, the agent responsible for the series of actions has been understood differently by each translator. Seidensticker believes it to be the male protagonist, while Holman

identifies it as the dancing girl. To translate a portion of their paragraph back into Japanese:

- (a) 私^は私^が縄梯子に捉(つか)まろうとして振り返った時、さよならを言はうとした。
^{Watashi}wa ^{Watashi}ga nawabashigo ni tsukamaro to shite furikaetta toki, sayonara o io to shita.
- (b) 踊子^は私^が縄梯子に捉(つか)まろうとして振り返った時、さよならを言はうとした。
^{Odoriko}wa ^{Watashi}ga nawabashigo ni tsukamaro to shite furikaetta toki, sayonara o io to shita.

The emphatic subject indicator *ga* in *watashi ga*, serves to indicate that the word to which it is suffixed is a factor exclusively selected out of other alternatives. This means that the subject of the main clause should be the other person, or *odoriko*.

3. The sequential illustration of mental and material phenomena

The sequential illustration of mental and material phenomena is a norm of Japanese composition. The following poem from the *Kokinshu* demonstrates such features and can be analyzed to trace how such features are dealt with in English translations (Uchiyama 2001).

[The *kokinshu* 2, Ki no Tsurayuki. Composed on the first day of spring.]²

<i>Sode hichite</i>	袖ひちて
<i>Musubishi mizu no</i>	むすびし水の
<i>koreru o</i>	こほれるを
<i>haru tatsu kyo no</i>	春立つけふの
<i>kaze ya tokuramu</i>	風やとくらむ

As Keichū points out in the *Kokin Yozai* (Sasaki, p.143), the fourth and fifth verses are a transformation of the following Chinese phrase in the chapter on “Seasonal Rites” in the *Li Chi* (礼記)³:

孟春之月、……東風解凍 (Takeuchi, p227)
In the first month of spring …… the easterly breeze begins to melt ice.

Verbs *musubu* and *toku* associate in meaning with *sode* at the beginning of the poem. The use of this *engo*⁴ was aimed at drawing attention to the passing

of time from summer into spring; that is, from the time in summer when the water, which the poet scooped in his hands, wetting his sleeves, began to be held in an icy grip, to the time when it started to melt. To this effect the poem is comprised of a repeating pattern of subject + verb: *sode + hichi*, *mizu + koreru*, *haru + tatsu*, and *kaze + toku*.

Therefore, the content of the poem could be expressed accordingly:

One day last summer, Tsurayuki stopped at a mountain pool and enjoyed its cool water as he scooped it up wetting his sleeves. Autumn and winter have already passed since then – and on the day when spring came in accordance to the calendar, he wondered if the water of that pool then held in winter’s icy grip had already started to melt beneath the easterly breeze that was said to blow on that particular day.

The motif of the poem is one of delight at the arrival of spring, as perceived from the viewpoint of the fleeting passage of a year, and not from a flash of intuition or emotion. This is an indirect expression of wonder at the swift progression of seasons. It is intended that human actions and changes of nature are expressed in a flow of the sequence. Do the following English translations capture these linguistic features?

- 1) today long-awaited
day when spring begins will
the breeze melt icebound
waters in which we once dipped
cupped hands drenching summer robes.
(Rodd)
- 2) On this first spring day
might warm breezes be melting
the frozen waters
I scooped up, cupping my hands
and letting my sleeves soak through?
(McCullough)

In both of the works the position of *sode* shows that neither Rodd nor McCullough accounted for the effect of *engo*. The *engo*, *sode*, should precede its associated words *musubishi* and *toku*. Rodd even avoided using this core word and adopted “robes” instead. In both of the translations, “sleeves” or “robes” occur in the final lines within the noun phrase qualifying *mizu*. Such an agglutinative

nature of English illustrates a fundamental syntactic difference from Japanese, in that in Japanese the modifying phrase precedes the modifier. Rhetorical devices such as *engo* were used effectively in Japanese poetry, syntactically allowing the fluid pattern of “subject+verb” to occur readily. Consequently, spiritual and material phenomena were illustrated sequentially.

Unfortunately, English translations mostly lack relevance to the poetic motif, owing to the different syntactic nature of English. In some cases translators did not witness such rhetorical devices ingeniously laid out.

The translation below was a personal collaboration with Joyce Ackroyd⁵. Our effort was to render this poem with front-to-back or left-to-right predication so that each action or event may be illustrated in accordance with the progression of seasons.

- 3) With dampened sleeves,
Last summer cool springs we scooped
To drink, froz’n long since.
Shall this soft presage of spring
Release them from winter’s grip? (Ackroyd
& Uchiyama)

4. The perceiving by the agent of effects caused by inanimate subjects in English

The Japanese generally find it difficult to conceive of an inanimate subject performing a conscious act of will or instigating a process. Such English sentences need to be translated so that they correspond to Japanese perceptions of phenomena. The conversion of the inanimate subject in the English sentence into an adverbial phrase or clause in Japanese is one method of dealing with this problem (Uchiyama, 1991).

- 4.1 According to the analysis of Quirk et al. (p. 743-749), the inanimate subject can be regarded as the cause of the perceived happenings, or as the instrument or means to an end. Accordingly the inanimate subject must be treated in Japanese as an adverbial phrase (Kunihiro, p.161). Similarly, the object of the sentence should be identified as being the Japanese subject of an action or event. In this situation, the use of a transitive verb is not possible and instead requires an intransitive counterpart or passive form of the verb to express the effect of the cause or means. The following examples show the typical

transformation pattern:

- (a) Original: The avalanche destroyed several houses.
 Adjusted: **Because of** the avalanche, several houses were destroyed.
 Japanese: Nadare **de** kaoku ga nanken ka tokai shita.
- (b) Original: A car knocked them down.
 Adjusted: **By** a car, they were knocked down.
 Japanese: Kuruma **ni** sono hitotachi wa hikitaosareta.
- (c) Original: The computer has solved the problem.
 Adjusted: **By** the computer, the problem has been solved.
 Japanese: Kompyuta **de** sono mondai wa kaiketsu shita.

The sentences with inanimate subjects represent an inevitable correlation between cause, or means, and effect. Therefore, the English inanimate subject must be converted to an adverbial phrase or clause so as to fulfill this role. The adverbial phrase or clause can be constructed by the use of particles or expressions such as *de*, *ni* and *ni yotte/ni yori*.⁶

4.2 Handling compound inanimate subjects

The translation process becomes even more hazardous when the inanimate subject in the original sentence is qualified by a modifying clause as below:

- (d) Original: A shortage of seats^{NP} [which limited the number of Japanese tourists^{NP} (who are able to make *the trip*)] *prevented an even more spectacular increase*^{NP} [that would have created more employment opportunities]

4.2.1 Quirk et al. draw attention to the question of predicate direction, which will be useful for handling compound inanimate subjects. The variable direction of predications which correspond to noun phrases postmodified by *of* contributes greatly to the complexity of these expressions and has a bearing on the correspondence with the genitive. Accordingly, there is left-to-right predication below in 1 and 2, and right-to-left predication in 3 and 4:

- The imprisonment of the murderer
 ~ (someone) imprisoned the murderer [1]
 a woman of courage [2]
 ~ The woman has courage [2]
- the arrival of the train] the train
 the train's arrival] arrived [3]
 the funnel of the ship ~ The ship has a funnel. [4]

With the left-to-right examples, it seems reasonable to assume a verb-object relationship. Similarly, the right-to-left examples show a subject-verb relationship. These relations are more obvious in [1] and [3], where the heads are deverbal nouns, than in [2] and [4], where the predicational relationship is covert or implicit (Quirk et al. p.1278).

If the English subject is compound one – comprised of two or more nouns, particularly when one stems from a verb, or is comprised of a noun and adjective, particle, or a numeral – it can be translated as an adverbial clause by predication, with the use of grammatical expressions such as *to*, *tara*, *node*, *tame (ni)*, and *niwa*.

- (e) Original: *A shortage of seats* limited the number of Japanese tourists who are able to make the trip.
 Adjusted (version 1): As available seats were insufficient, the number of Japanese tourists who are able to make the trip is limited.
 Japanese: (*Hikoki no*) *zaseki ga tarinai tame ni* ryoko ni dekakerareru hazu no nipponjin kankokyaku no kazu ni genkai ga shojita.

We have right-to-left predication which assumes a subject-adjective relationship. If we want to follow the order of the English original and deal first with the modified word, “Japanese tourists”, and then the modifying clause, “who are able to make the trip”, the modifying clause must be converted to one of opposite meaning using a negative so it corresponds with the overall context:

- Adjusted (version 2): *As available seats were insufficient* the number of Japanese was limited, preventing many from making the trip, even though they wanted to.
 Japanese: (*Hikoki no*) *zaseki ga tarinai tame ni* nipponjin kankokyaku no kazu ga kagirarete shimai, ryoko ni ikitakutemo

ikenaku natte shimau no de aru.

- (f) Original: *A shortage of seats* prevented an even more spectacular increase.
 Adjusted: *As the number of seats was insufficient*, we were precluded witnessing an even more spectacular increase.
 Japanese: (*Hikoki no*) *zaseki ga tarinai tame ni kankokyaku ga hiyakutekini zodai shite iku mikomi wa nakunatta.*

Left-to right predication assumes a subject-adjective relationship:

- (g) Original: *A more spectacular increase* would have created more employment opportunities
 Adjusted (version 1): *If an increase had been more spectacular*, more employment opportunities would have been created.
 Japanese (version 1): (*kankokyaku no*) *nobi ga sarani hiyakutekina mono datta nara, koyo kikai ga sarani zodai shite ita daro.*

This last subjunctive sentence can be rewritten in an actual sense, exactly opposite the original:

Adjusted (version 2): *Because an increase was not more spectacular*, no more employment opportunities could be created.
 Japanese (version 2): (*kankokyaku no*) *nobi ga sarani hiyakutekina mono de wa nakkata koto kara, koyo kikai ga sarani zodai suru to iu yona koto mo nakunatta no de aru.*

4.2.2 We can now put the three Japanese sentences (e), (f) and (g) together:

- (h) Original: A shortage of seats^{NP} [which limited the number of Japanese tourists^{NP} (who are able to make *the trip*)] *prevented an even more spectacular increase*^{NP} [that would have created more employment opportunities]
 Adjusted (version 1): *As available seats were insufficient*, the number of Japanese tourists who are able to make the trip was limited, *and consequently* made it impossible for us to witness an even more spectacular increase. Otherwise (*if all had gone well*), more employment opportunities would have been created.
 Japanese (version 1): (*Hikoki no*) *zaseki ga*

tarinai koto kara, ryoko ni dekakerareru hazu no nipponjin kankokyaku no kazu ni genkai ga shoji, kankokyaku ga hiyakuteki ni zodai shite iku mikomi wa nakunatte shimatta. Moshi juntoni itte itara, koyo kikai ga sarani zodai shite ita daro.

Adjusted (version 2): *As available seats were insufficient*, the number of Japanese tourists was limited, *and this* prevented them from making the trip, even though they wanted to. *It thus* became impossible for us to witness an even more spectacular increase, *and this meant that* no more employment opportunities could be created.

Japanese (version 2): (*Hikoki no*) *zaseki ga tarinai to, nipponjin kankokyaku no kazu ni genkai ga shoji, ryoko ni ikitakute mo ikenaku naru koto kara (kankokyaku no) hiyakuteki na nobi wa nozomenaku nari, koyo kikai ga sarani zodai suru to iu yona koto mo arienaku naru wake de aru.*

4.2.3 The processing of the inanimate subjects was successfully undertaken first, followed by the noun-phrase, the subject of which were also inanimate. With regard to the original English sentence (d) which contains three relative clauses including the one whose subject is animate, it turned out that each clause can be consecutively translated one clause after another.

Conclusion

1. I highlighted some causes of obscurity of the subject arising from the self-centered mindset of Japanese and the perspective of Japanese expressions.
2. I highlighted the effect of Japanese perception in conjunction with the sequential illustration of mental and material phenomena.
3. I highlighted the effect of the issues arising from inanimate subjects in English and subsequently outlined adaptive strategies to overcome such problems.

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Notes

1. *The Kokinshu* is the first imperial anthology ordered by Emperor Daigo. Completed in 905. Compiled by Ki no Tsurayuki, Oshikochi Mitsune, and Mibu no Tadamine. Contains 1,111 poems. Seasonal and love poems dominate the collection.
2. For the transferring and transliterations of Japanese texts, I quoted *Kokin Wakashu* by Ozawa [1971].
3. The *Li Chi*, one of the five Confucian books, is a later restoration of the original of *Classic of Rites*. It is a source book of ancient Chinese rites and court manners. In addition to rules and regulations, it contains many interesting anecdotes relating to these rules [Liu Wu-Chi: 1966, p.11].
4. *Engo* “word association” entails the relationship of disparate elements in a poem through the use of a word that has or creates an “association” with the preceding word or situation, often bringing out an additional dimension of meaning and giving two expressions a secondary richness.
5. Joyce Ackroyd (1918-1986) wrote widely on Japanese language, literature and history. Her publications include *Lessons From History*, *Arai Hakuseki's Tokushi Yoron* (University of Queensland Press, 1982) and *Told Round a Bushwood*, *The Autobiography of Arai Hakuseki* (Columbia University Press, 1995).
6. **de** as in the above sentence (a) denotes reason or cause.
ni as in (b) is used when the Japanese subject is a recipient of the effect of an event.
de as in (c) indicates means to an end
ni yotte/ni yotte is more emphatic than the above particles; it is usually used when an action of general or abstract nature is described. It is also used when an action undertaken for something or a concept of abstract nature is described objectively.

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