

A Comparative Study of the Language in a Japanese Novel and Its English Translation — Dazai's *Ningen Shikkaku* —

92E 086 Yumiko Tsuchida

1. Introduction

I have studied about the differences of expressions between Japanese and English. Last year, I learned that Japanese people prefer 'situation-focus' to 'person-focus' expressions and English people prefer 'person-focus' to 'situation-focus' expressions. They are found, for example, in the difference in the use of transitive constructions and intransitive constructions. Because this difference can be seen in translation from Japanese to English, I decided to check and review it with one Japanese novel.

I determined to use *Ningen Shikkaku*, written by Osamu Dazai. The English title is *No Longer Human*, translated by Donald Keene. I chose these books, because I read them last year in order to write a paper for the course of comparative literature. Then, I found difficulty in reading it even in Japanese. And I thought that this novel must have confused the translator. So I was interested to compare Japanese expressions with English expressions in these books.

I always feel it difficult to translate from Japanese into English. So I hope that this study will be useful when I translate Japanese into English.

2. Inanimate Subjects

In this section, I will examine sentences with inanimate subjects. Let's see the sentences below:

- (1) 女があんなに急に泣き出したりした場合、(中略)ということだけは、幼い時から、自分の経験に依って知っていました。(p.33)
- (1') Long personal experience had taught me that when a woman suddenly burst into hysterics, ... (p.52)
- (1'') 長い自分の経験は、女性が突然泣き出した時には、(中略)ということ、私に教えた。

In (1), the sentence subject is not expressed, but it is interpreted as *I*. On the other hand the subject in (1') is *long personal experience*. *Long personal experience* is an inanimate matter. The literal Japanese translation of (1') is (1''), but it is less natural than (1), because we usually don't use expressions in which an inanimate matter does something. We usually describe it as a mediation, reason or means. While I was reading, I found that there were many sentences like these. I wondered

why these differences arise. So I decided to consider these differences.

In the above examples, the subject in Japanese (自分—used to represent the first person narrator) changes to the object in English (*me*). Reversely, the subject in English (*Long personal experience*) is shown to the mediation in Japanese (幼い時から、自分の経験に依って).

There is another example like (1).

(2) 竹一の言葉に依って、自分のそれまでの絵画に対する心構えが、まるで間違っていた事に気が付きました。(p.36)

(2') Takeichi's words made me aware that my mental attitude towards painting had been completely mistaken. (p.55)

(2'') 竹一の言葉は、絵画に対する私の心構えが完全に間違っていたということを、私に気付かせた。

In (2), the subject in Japanese (自分) changes to the object in English (*me*) and the subject in English (*Takeichi's words*) is expressed as the reason in Japanese (竹一の言葉に依って).

Although the original sentence and its translation sentence describe the same content, each sentence has a different structure: the subject in each sentence is different, as I mentioned above. Well then, why is the subject different in each sentence?

In our cognitive process of events or situations, the thing which is considered to have more energy and to have influence on others is more important, and it is more likely for such a thing to be expressed as the sentence subject. In the Japanese case, Japanese people regard it as strange that inanimate matters, which cannot be active, do something. So we feel (1) and (2) more natural than (1'') and (2''). On the other hand, in English, the causer is considered to have more energy than the experiencer. This is why *long personal experience* in (1') and *Takeichi's words* in (2') are described as the sentence subject.

Now, let's see the sentences below:

(3) 堀木は、(中略) 頭髪もポマードをつけてまん中からべったりとわけていました。(p.40)

(3') His hair was pomaded and parted in the middle. (p.59)

(3'') 彼の髪は、ポマードをつけられ、まん中でわけられていた。

This example differs from the previous examples. Certainly, in (3') an inanimate thing (*his hair*) is the subject, but 堀木 in (3) is not necessarily the grammatical subject. Sentence (3) describes Horiki's state. In the sentences like (3), Japanese tend to put up as a topic one person and describe one's state. So 堀木 has a function as the topic rather than as the subject. On the other hand as in (3'), after a person was built up as a topic, English tends to describe as the subject a certain part of the person because of its grammatical constraint.

Sentence (3''), the literal translation of (3'), is less natural than (3). But it

is possible for Japanese to express 彼の髪 as the subject. It is expressed like the following:

(3^{'''}) 堀木の髪は、ポマードをつけて、まん中でわけてあった。

It is far more natural than (3^{''}). The reason why we feel so is as follows: in (3^{''}), we will accept 彼の髪は as the inanimate subject, while in (3^{'''}), we will accept 彼の髪は as the topic (彼の髪については).

3. The Differences of Construction

While I was reading, I found sentences like the following:

(4) 気まずい場所に、永くとどまっているほど間の抜けた堀木ではありませんでした。
(p.116)

(4') Horiki was not stupid enough to linger in an embarrassing situation.
(p.149)

(5) 彼の快樂のために、自分を利用できるところだけは利用する、それっきりの「交友」だったのだ。(p.112)

(5') His friendship had no other purpose but to utilize me in whichever way would most further his own pleasures. (p.144)

I will examine the differences of construction which are found in the above examples.

In (4), 堀木 is in the final position of the sentence and 気まずい場所に、永くとどまっているほど間の抜けた is placed before 堀木 and modifies it, while in (4'), Horiki is in the subject position and other elements are placed after it in the predicate position. In the same way, 「交友」 appears in the end of the sentence in (5) but *his friendship* is in the subject position. These examples show us the following: in Japanese, the assertion appears in the end of the sentence and modifying elements are put previous to the assertion. On the other hand, in English, the assertion appears next to the subject and some information concerned with it is added behind the assertion.

Kuno (1973) describes characteristics of each language like above examples as follows: in Japanese the object appears before the verb; Japanese is an SOV-language. Modifiers are also put previous to the modified words. So we consider Japanese is a left-branching language. On the other hand, in English, the object appears behind the verb; English is an SVO-language. Adjectives and relative clauses are put behind their antecedents. English is a right-branching language.

Let's consider example (4-5) based on the above explanation. In (4), ...ではありませんでした is in the last and words which modify 堀木 are put previous to 堀木. And in (5), ...だったのだ is in the last and words which modify 交友 are put previous to 交友. On the other hand, in (4'), the subject *horiki* is in the initial position of the sentence, and the verb *was* is put behind the subject. And other words appear behind the verb. In (5'), *his friendship* is in the initial position and

had is put behind the subject. And other words appear behind the verb. Just like mirror image, Japanese and English place the noun and its modifier or statement about it in the inverted order.

The reason why we recognize 気まずい…間の抜けた as a modifier and was not *stupid…situation* as the predicate is in the difference of construction shown in the above explanation.

4. Functional Inversion between the Main Clause and the Subordinate Clause

The next examples make me puzzled, for when-clause and the main clause in translation sentence is in the reverse order to original sentence:

(6) …などと頭脳に走馬燈がくるくる廻っていた時に、「おい! とんだ、そら豆だ。来い!」

堀木の声も顔色も変わっています。(p.115)

(6') …Such thoughts were flashing through my head like a revolving lantern when I heard a voice.

“Extraordinary beans you’ve got here. Come have a look.”

Horiki’s voice and color had changed. (p.147)

(7) しかし、どうにも、父がけむったく、おそろしく、この家を出て、どこか下宿でも、と考へながらもそれを言い出せずにはいた矢先に、父がその家を売払うつもりらしいという事を別荘番の老爺から聞きました。(p.49)

(7') I was just thinking (without as daring to propose it) how I would like to leave the house and find lodgings elsewhere, when I learned from our old caretaker that my father apparently intended to sell the house. (p.70)

Usually, *when*-clauses function as the background, and the main clause functions as the foreground. In (6), …などと頭脳に走馬燈がくるくる廻っていた is the background and 「おい! とんだ、そら豆だ。来い!」 is the foreground. So we may expect (6) to be translated into the following:

(6'') When such thoughts were flashing through my head like a revolving lantern, I heard a voice.

In the same way, in (7), しかし…言い出せずにはいた is the background and 父が…老爺から聞きました is the foreground. So we may expect (7) to be translated into the following:

(7'') When I was just thinking…and find lodgings elsewhere, I learned from our old caretaker that my father apparently intended to sell the house.

But (6) and (7) were respectively expressed as (6') and (7'). In this section, I will examine the effect that is expressed as (6') and (7').

We certainly feel (6'') and (7'') are more natural than (6') and (7'). The reason for that is as mentioned above. But actually (6') and (7') are used in this translation. As long as they are used, they must have some effect. As a matter of fact, (6') and (7') show us that the *when*-clause in these sentences is functionally

the foreground and important in the communication of information. This is an effect of using *when*-clauses as in (6') and (7').

The characteristics of sentences like (6') and (7') are as follows: the verb forms in the backgrounded clause are usually the past perfect or the past progressive. These forms are used to describe the situation.

The sentences differ in that the foregrounded event is expressed in the main clause in Japanese, while it is expressed in the subordinate clause in English. But in both cases the backgrounded event is placed first, and the foregrounded event is placed in the final position.

5. Lexical Differences

In This section, I will take up the difference of words. Let's see the sentences below:

(8) 堀木の老母が、おしるこを二つお盆に載せて持って来ました。(p.81)

(8') Horiki's aged mother brought in a tray with two dishes of jelly. (p.110)

“おしるこ” is familiar with Japanese people. Everyone can visualize the shape and remember the taste of “おしるこ”. But for English people, except for ones who have lived in Japan for a long time, it is difficult to imagine the Japanese food “おしるこ”. If the translator explained this food to readers, they could somehow imagine it. For example, the explanation like the following would be possible: “おしるこ” is a Japanese food in which pieces of rice cake and other things are put into the soup of melted sweet bean paste. But even rice cake and sweet bean paste may be unknown to some English people. This would require longer sentences of explanation. So the translator probably thought that the unfamiliar word “おしるこ” had better be changed into a familiar word “jelly.” Certainly, it seems that by this change English readers could rather read smoothly and understand the story easily than read it taking minute explanation into consideration. At first, however, I was surprised that “おしるこ” and “jelly” are accepted as the same thing. And I understood when I read the following sentence:

(9) 自分もそれをすすりましたが、お湯のにおいがして、そうして、お餅を食べたら、それはお餅ではなく、自分にはわからないものでした。(p.82)

(9') I also spooned my bowl of jelly. It tasted watery, and when I came to the piece of fruit at the bottom, it was not fruit after all, but a substance I could not identify. (p.110)

In (9), poverty is expressed through the food “おしるこ.” In short, a reader who doesn't know this food may also be unable to feel this poverty. So a free translation in which “おしるこ” is changed to “jelly” is effective in this case.

The next sentence is also the free translation.

(10) 「ツミの対語は、ミツさ。蜜の如く甘しだ。腹がへったなあ。(中略)」(p.114)

(10') “Well if you spell ‘crime’ backwards-no, that doesn't make sense. But

the word does contain the letter r-i-c-e. Rice. I'm hungry...." (p.146)
 The translator must have taken pains to translate this sentence. When we read the word ツミ backward, another word ミツ comes into existence. ツミ (罪) and ミツ (蜜) are both meaningful and they are both associated with "sweet" or "attractive". This pun is limited to Japanese. Even if one reads the word *crime* backward, it will not make any sense. But the translator has to end the talk by associating it with the content of "I'm hungry." He overcame this difficulty by changing the arrangement of letters.

Similar pairs of examples are given below:

(11) ドテラにも着換えず、(p.123)

(11') I did not change into sports clothes. (p.156)

(12) その買い物は、実は趣味の悪い品ばかりで、自分はたいてい、すぐにそれを、焼きとり屋の親爺などにやってしまいました (p.53)

(12') they were without exception in extraordinarily bad taste and I usually disposed of them immediately to the postman or the grocery boy (p.75)

(13) 甘納豆はどう？カステラも、パンもあるよ、(p.10)

(13') How about some jelly beans? There's cake and biscuits too. (p.23)

(14) 堀木は二階のたった一部屋の六畳を使い、下では、堀木の老父母と、それから若い職人と三人、下駄の鼻緒を縫ったり叩いたりして製造しているのです。(p.80)

(14') Horiki occupied only one medium-sized room on the second floor; downstairs his parents and a young workman were busily stitching and pounding strips of cloth to make thongs for sandals. (p.108)

The above English sentences are translated freely so that English readers can understand the contents. And English readers may read these without trouble. But I found that reading the original in comparison with its translation makes us aware of lots of interesting things.

6. Conclusion

As I mentioned in Introduction, at first I planned to examine the difference between 'situation-focus' expressions and 'person-focus' expressions. Once I began to read, however, I became aware that there are many differences which more easily caught my eye and seemed more interesting.

First of all I had an interest in inanimate subjects. I could trace them easily, because they were taught in English class as characteristic expressions in English. In the next place, I had an interest in the differences of words. Indeed I knew that the free translations are often done so that readers can understand easily, but the free translations that I found amused and impressed me. And then, I faced the differences of constructions. Thanks to this problem, the differences of constructions in the languages that had been vague were made clear to me. And in functional inversion between the main clause and the subordinate clause discussed in section

4, I experienced the joy of attending lectures and making the issue clear.

Text

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(卒論指導教員 上野恵美子)