

Alfresco Japanese Whispers

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At the closing luncheon of IJET-4 1993 in Brisbane an exercise in consecutive translating was conducted, drawing on the expertise of the assembled translators and interpreters. A simple phrase in English was chosen as the starting point and a Japanese speaker was asked to translate it. This in turn was translated back into English, and then back into Japanese again and so on. People were asked to translate into their own language and were given sixty seconds to do so. No one saw anything but the previous version, and were therefore unaware of the subtle changes that were taking place.

It should be noted here that some difficulty was encountered due to people's handwriting, but as the participants became aware of the overall objective, a guarantee of anonymity seemed to become more important. In deference to these numerous requests I therefore present the results typed up, with annotation where appropriate.

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bridges between cultures are built on foundations of tolerance.2. 文化のかけ橋、忍耐を土台となる。3. Patience, indeed, is the foundation of bridges between cultures.4. 文化のかけ橋になるのは、忍耐しかありません。5. The only cultural bridge is forbearance. 6. 文化は理解することで結ばれる。7. Cultures are linked by understanding others.8. 他の人たちを理解することにより文化交流がなされる。9. Cultural exchange is done by evaluating other people.10. 文化交流は、外国の人を理解することで始まる。11. International understanding begins with an understanding of foreigners.12. 国際理解は外国の人を理解することから始まる。13. International understanding begins with an understanding of foreign people.14. 国際理解は外国人を理解することから始まる。15. International understanding begins with the act of understanding foreigners.16. 会得する、理解、始めに、その行動は外国人の行動を理解すること。17. Understand first that behaviour is to understand the behaviour of foreigners.18. 外国人の行動であるとまず理解すること。19. To understand from the outset that this is the way foreigners behave.20. 外国の方はこういうふうに行動するものだと初めから理解すること。21. You must understand that this is how foreigners	<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. "Foundation" component of metaphor disappears.5. 「忍耐」 alternatively translated as "tolerance", "patience" and "forbearance". The latter perhaps confusing the translator who finds refuge in an ambiguous use of the word 「理解」 which then of course become "understanding". A very durable concept which lasts until 21.6. "Bridge" metaphor disappears via 「結び」 and "link".7 and 8, "People" are introduced through the ambiguity of 「他」. 17 Statement becomes rather incoherent imperative due to confusing layout of 16.18 Does not read 17 as imperative19 Seems to become conditional clause here. 21 Back to the imperative.
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<p>behave.</p> <p>22. 外国の方はこうなさいます。</p> <p>23. This is the way foreigners would do it.</p> <p>24. これは外国人がよくするやり方です。</p> <p>25. This is what foreigners often do.</p> <p>26. 外国がどんなことをよく行いますか。</p> <p>27. What kind of things do they like to do in foreign countries?</p> <p>28. その人たちは (かれらは) 外国にいったときどんなことをしたいのでしょうか。</p> <p>29. What do you think they might want to do when they go overseas?</p> <p>30. 太りすぎたら、どうそれに対応しますか。</p> <p>31. If you are too fat, how do you handle the problem?</p> <p>32. 太りすぎていたら、どうそれに対応しますか。</p> <p>33. If you were too fat, what would you do?</p> <p>34. ふとり過ぎていたら貴方はどうなさいますか。</p> <p>35. What will the lord do when he gets too fat?</p> <p>36. 神は肥りすぎたらどうするか。</p> <p>37. What do you do if God is too fat?</p> <p>38. 神様があまりに太っていたらどうしますか。</p> <p>39. What would you do if god was too fat?</p> <p>40. 神が肥満過多だったら貴方は、、、</p> <p>41. If God were too fat, what would you be?</p> <p>42. 肥りすぎの神様がいたらどう思いますか。</p> <p>43. If there is an overweight God, what do you think?</p> <p>44. 太りすぎの神様がいたらどう思いますか。</p> <p>45. What would you think of a fat God.</p> <p>46. 太った神様をどう思いますか。</p> <p>47. What do you think of the fat God.</p> <p>48. 神様太ったでしょう？</p> <p>49. You look well God!</p> <p>50. やあ、元気そうじゃないか！</p> <p>51. Hello my lover. You'm be lookin' fine today. (Devonshire)</p>	<p>22 Then back again to descriptive statement</p> <p>23 "would do it" if what? Do what?</p> <p>24 Solves above problem, but introduces question of frequency.</p> <p>26 Inexplicably becomes question. Also omits 「人」. Leaving sentence to mean "What sort of things do foreign countries often do?"</p> <p>27 In order to make sense of the above, invents identity/ies, not necessarily native to the countries, who now have a choice about "what they do".</p> <p>28 Good, if cumbersome, translation that makes it plain that "they" are visitors.</p> <p>30 Handwriting problem. Misreads "overseas" as "overeats".</p> <p>31 Introduces value judgment on obesity.</p> <p>32 Female translator said she would rather not translate something like this. I emphasised that it was only a game so she obliged (but didn't see obesity as a problem).</p> <p>34 Renders "you" as 「貴方」.</p> <p>35 Mistakes 「貴方」 for 「貴族」 and renders it as "lord".</p> <p>36 Reads "lord" as "God".</p> <p>39, 43, 47 all manage without a personal pronoun in the Japanese. Personal pronouns cause problems on both occasions they appear in 34 and 40.</p> <p>40 Bases vague, open-ended question on condition that God were too fat.</p> <p>41 Good logical translation that deduces remainder of question.</p> <p>42 Raises question of attitude rather than "being".</p> <p>46 Rumored fat God lives!</p> <p>48 Renders simple question as traditional Japanese greeting addressed to God.</p> <p>49 Good translation.</p> <p>50 Supreme being departs as "God" is read simply as exclamatory component of greeting.</p> <p>51 Very ably translated into equivalent dialect.</p>
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This result suggests to me certain questions worth pursuing. The changes to the text were of a particular type. The text was reduced, simplified according to describable criteria, and I think It's reasonable to assume that the same thing would happen regardless of the original text.

For instance, concrete objects will be more durable than abstract concepts. Metaphors will become literal, then be discarded because they're absurd. The first person will take over, and commitment to a particular time will be avoided,

leading to a vagueness of tense. Refuge will finally be sought in a personal and familiar, even childlike, modality.

It must certainly be the case that some aspects of language are more or less easily translated than others. Naturally, with repeated exposure to the translation process, if anything is to change it will tend to be the more difficult things. These must, in fact, be eventually lost in the translation.

Might it not then be reasonable to postulate that if a wide variety of texts were subject to the same process, and that if they were translated a sufficient number of times, that they might all come to resemble one another? That they might all, in fact, approach and become the one primal text? Might we thus discover the one, pro-genetic kernel of meaning that underpins all sentient cognitive activity? Could it, indeed, be the name of God? Or just a funny grunting noise?

This then also raises the question of logical entailment. Conducting the devolution of texts in this manner may contribute to our understanding of how it is that humans manage to employ such elaborate systems of language that enable them to speak of tenseless, abstract and untestable things, far removed from their own (and for that matter anyone else's) time and place. Not unlike stripping down an engine to its constituent parts to see how it works.

It may therefore be argued that the sentiment contained in the final text (No. 51) is logically entailed in the original text. To put it another way, perhaps it is impossible to build bridges between cultures, or even tolerate other people, unless one has at least once experienced the uncomplicated social bonding that might begin with the words "Hello my lover".

Indeed the entire anatomy of the original text is laid bare for us to see here. The lofty comment on cultural intercourse is constructed on a complex framework, and as we descend through it (backwards in time) we see "tolerance" give way to "forbearance" then to the more basic "understanding". We then see a concern for nothing more than what foreigners "do". Then, with passing reference to the supreme being, and anxiety over his or her abandoning us for corporeal pleasure, we find safe haven in the vernacular of common folk.

Perhaps we have cause for relief in finding that the motive force behind the building of "bridges between cultures" seems to be the simple and forthright affection seen in the final utterance. Could international relations be entrusted to anyone better than the people who gave us warm scones, strawberry jam and cream? I think not.

There may be objections that due to the relatively small sample number (one), these conclusions are premature, and the question may have to be consigned to more rigorous testing in the future. I would be happy to undertake this research, but it would depend on two things. One: a gathering together in the one place of such a large number of eminent and capable translators, and two: that they're all still speaking to me.

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