

# Translation Pathfinders: Invitation to Adventure

Half of language-learning is translation, the other half is acquiring a grasp of culture, and TJF programs are devoted to supporting efforts to bridge the gaps between culture and language. The people who really love language and cannot resist the adventure of inter-cultural encounter are often translators, interpreters, and language teachers. We can learn a lot from the insights and experience of these people who labor in the trenches between different languages and cultures. Lynne Riggs, of the Center for Intercultural Communication, has been working in Japan as an editor and professional translator since 1976.

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The translator sits down at the computer, Japanese manuscript at hand, a pile of dictionaries beyond, and a blank page. Here in this space, two languages converge. The world of Japanese rises up from the manuscript page. In the mind's eye images take form, as they do for the Japanese reader, bringing the words alive in their intended context.

And then the eye focuses on the blank page. One English word, then another, extend across the screen, rebuilding elements of meaning in a different world, the world of English. There, the images that floated around the characters of the original are absent. The landscape of understanding is empty save for what the translator sets down there. Your words, like footprints on a snowy field, cut the pathway that others will follow.

Translation is an adventure you write yourself over the terrain of language and culture. You'll slog through the turgid swamps of abstraction. You'll wade through the murk of ambiguity and euphemism. You'll walk the tight-rope of distinctions you never heard of in your own language. There will be cul-de-sacs in the pursuit of meaning that no lexicographer has pathbroken for you. Like the knights of old or the Nintendo players of now, you embark on this journey with only your wits and your curiosity to protect you (from doing a bad job).

In the American television fantasy, "The Secret World of Alex Mack" a girl exposed to an experimental chemical finds she can liquidate herself at will and slither away across the lawn, then materialize herself again on the other side of a fence. This is an apt image for translation: to be able to liquidate the expressions, images, and information of the original and then materialize them again, hopefully with the same content, in a different place. Too bad we don't have such a chemical for translation!

A working translator, like Alex Mack, doesn't really know why she can pull the trick off, but unlike Alex, it's not the work of an ill-conceived chemical, but of unreplaceable human intuition and accumulated knowledge. In the respected

tradition of wilderness guides, craftsmen, and adventurers, you are trained by teachers other professions don't know. There are tricks of the trade, pathfinders' rules, that will keep you from getting bogged down, from going astray, and from leading others astray. Here is a handful to start with.

## **Beware of word-for-word translation**

If the landscape of a translation is filled with the replicated scenery of the original, you know you are in safe territory. But all too often, the prospect is cluttered with the litter of deconstructed, piecemeal text—the words and phrases—scattered helter-skelter across the now-English terrain, with little of the order or adhesive that held together their Japanese antecedents. Even translating machines can do that.

## **Don't translate the words, translate the meaning**

Many Japanese expressions pack a lot of meaning into a brief utterance—"Gokurōsama!" "Yoroshiku!" You think it would be nice to just adopt them into English, but the translator can't cut corners. It helps to back away from the words themselves and render the meaning into English as it would be expressed in English: *Gokurōsama* loses something in a simple "Thank you!" but that is the culture it ended up in; hopefully it will be said with heartfelt feeling. *Yoroshiku* can mean anything from "It's a pleasure to meet you," to "I'm counting on you to take care of the rest." Everything is determined by context.

## **Improve the trail as you go along, but don't twist it**

The translation has to get through to the reader; there is no point rendering it in words that make no sense. In poetry, the evocative and abstract want to be rendered with the evocative and abstract, but for non-fiction text, ambiguity and abbreviation put you on perilous ground. Cultures are crammed with associations and folklore, the translator can pass to

the English reader bits of the native speaker's crib sheet. Overdoing explanation, however, can ruin the effect.

## **Use dictionaries only as reference**

Dictionaries don't have all the answers. Treasure, but don't overrate them. Use them to refresh your memory, confirm your conjectures, expand your vocabulary. Sometimes it helps to look up the word that is the opposite of the one you are translating. Meaning emerges in context; it doesn't come out of the dictionary.

## **Translation is a form of creative writing**

Feet planted firmly in the soil of what the original author wrote, you are the author of the translation. Marshall your best writing talents to speak for the author effectively and correctly in English.

### **Some basic tools of translation (from bottom up):**

*Kokugo daijiten.* Shōgakukan. This large dictionary is strong on historical and cultural terms.

*Kōjien.* Iwanami Shoten. The basic household dictionary. 5th edition. Also available on CD-ROM.

*Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary.* Kenkyūsha. Rather outdated, but the standard J-E dictionary. Can be replaced with some CD-ROM dictionaries if you prefer.

*Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia.* Kōdansha. The handier, more colorful version of Kōdansha's 9-volume *Encyclopedia of Japan*.

*The New Nelson: Japanese-English Character Dictionary.* Tuttle, 1997. Basic tool for efficient reading of text with kanji, giving English meanings along with the readings.

*Japan Style Sheet, the SWET Guide for Writers, Editors and Translators.* Stone Bridge Press, 1998. Handy source of advice on style questions, with useful appendices.

*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.* Just an example. You should never be far from your English dictionary.

At left are some of the books translated by the author.

