

Translation Pathfinders: Between the Exotic and the Different

In introducing culture to newcomers, one of the most unfortunate tendencies is to over-exoticize it. Every culture is distinctive, and Japan's no more so than any other, so it is important to maintain perspective. While the message to be transferred from Japanese to English often deals with customs, ideas, or other subject matter unfamiliar to readers, the best result is often one that does not draw attention to that fact.

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"A Day in the Life"

Take *hanami*. I must not be the first to think that the common English translation of the term, "cherry-blossom viewing," gives this timeless pastime an odd image. One imagines prim, elegant people poised for a mainly aesthetic, ritual exercise, whereas the reality is nothing so formal, whether in the sixteenth or the twentieth century. So, in the "Day in the Life" feature in these pages, I have studiously avoided "viewing." No one is immune to the spell of the cherry blossoms that burst out on warm late March/early April days as the bitter cold of winter withdraws. The enjoyment of this magic is *hanami*, and cannot be expressed better in English. Still, I doubt that resi-

dents of Washington, D.C. speak of going for a *hanami*, but neither are they likely to say they are going "cherry blossom viewing." They might say they are "going to see the flowers," or "going to have a picnic under the cherry blossoms."

Say something as it would be said by people in English if it were part of their lives.

It would be easy, when rendering text such as translated on pp. 10-13 of this newsletter, to leave readers thinking, "how quaint" or "how can mature adults get so excited about a bunch of flowers?" We can readily imagine hearing "Aa, wakuwaku shichau!" in Japanese, but if we translate that as "Oh, I'm getting all excited!" the speaker comes out sounding pretty giddy. What are the words that would go with this in the same context in English? "I can hardly wait!" is a free translation. This is what is meant, but it is not a direct rendering of "wakuwaku." To translate so literally that the speaker sounds silly, naive, or overly sentimental does not translate the meaning, only the individual words.

Even though the translator is called upon to render in English what the Japanese says, sometimes it sounds really odd in the other language.

You might hear a precocious little 6-year-old child on his way to his first day of school remark to his mother, "Sakura mo bokutachi no nyūgaku o o-iwai shite iru mitai!" but where would you hear an American kid say anything like that to anybody in English? Not likely. The deadpan *chokuyaku* on page 10 ("Look, the cherry blossoms are celebrating our first day at school!") gives one pause.

Mediate meaning with discretion and subtlety

And then there is the phrase "hana yori dango" (p. 10). This falls flat in English, but we press on, floundering through three different attempts to get across the idea, and in the end you'd really prefer the phrase in Japanese just as it is. The girls on page 10 not only have their cake and are eating it too. The cakes are skewered *dango*, presenting another dilemma. The usual translation of *dango*—dumpling—is just untenable. The lack of equivalence with any confection in English calls upon the reader to learn a new word. The translator is the arbiter of what will go untranslated or be perhaps ineptly expressed.

Where I really squirmed was having to translate a ninth-century poem from the *Kokinshū* (p. 11) and the lyrics to the song, "Sakura, sakura" (p. 13). Don't even think that these translations are lyrical; they simply attempt to give the meaning of each line. Both are works of literature that are best appreciated in the original. The special ring of words like "miwatasu kagiri," "kasumi," and "nioi," vividly evoke the landscape of spring. To translate "Sakura" as a song, the translator must actually go one step further, rewriting the poetry and finessing the images for equivalent lyricism in English. Sometimes you can find a standard translation done by a specialist that may be used with permission and attribution, but often that is not an option. Even the generalist translator will face such a serious literary task from time to time.

Japanese is an "in-language," so translating it means unlocking its secrets for those outside. Great discretion can be exercised in this task: either to achieve communication and clarity or to propagate exoticism and mystery. This is not only a creative but an ethical challenge, toward which the translator must aim all the secret weapons of the profession.