

THEMATIC CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION BETWEEN JAPANESE AND ENGLISH

A dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The history of translation can be traced back to the time before any of the different languages were first encountered. Broadly speaking, interlingual translation is a part of the whole translatable objects in semiotics. In the semiotic world, one can translate between different modes, for instance the score of a piece of music is translated into performance. Therefore, human beings have long been involved in various types of translation, but in today's global society interlingual translation is becoming increasingly important. The study of translation, however, is relatively new and somehow stagnant because of a gap between theory and practice. I think that a well-balanced combination of theory and practice is essential for both translation studies and translators. If either side is missing, we cannot expect the full development of this discipline and profession.

Baker (1992) encourages formal academic training of translators through which they make a conscious effort to understand various aspects of their work. She claims "throughout its long history, translation has never really enjoyed the kind of recognition and respect that other professions such as medicine and engineering enjoy" and suggests "translators need

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to develop an ability to stand back and reflect on what they do and how they do it" (ibid.: 2-4). This is the starting point of what I am going to try to establish in this research.

Research questions

It is relatively recent that translation studies have realized the thematic problems, so I think it useful to start with Ventola's fundamental question (1995:85): "What happens to the text's Theme-Rheme structures and their thematic patterns and developments when the text goes through a translation process?" More specifically, I try to answer the following questions in this research.

1. What are similarities and differences between Japanese and English with regard to Theme-Rheme structures at a clause level and thematic developments at a discourse level when comparing the source language text and the target language text?
2. What are the thematic challenges the translator encounters when translating between Japanese and English?

These basic questions may not necessarily find simple answers. However, this is my very first exploration into the world of translation potentiality, so I do not intend to hurry towards a definite conclusion immediately but rather to make these research questions a starting point of more extensive text analyses in the future.

Thematic equivalence

In the systemic functional model of the lexicogrammar, language has three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal and textual. These three are simultaneous strands of meaning, but "while translation should give equal weight to all three metafunctional contributions, there has been a strong tendency to give more weight to the ideational metafunction" (Matthiessen 1999:47). It is unfortunate that the traditional translation studies have paid little attention to the textual equivalence.

The thematic analysis with functional grammar helps translators become aware of how the text guides readers as it unfolds. Halliday uses a clause as a unit for analysis and textually divides it into two parts; Theme and Rheme. He defines the Theme as "the point of departure of the message" and the Rheme as "the remainder of the message," so "as a message structure, a clause consists of a Theme accompanied by a Rheme" (1994:37). Baker clearly points out two functions of the Theme (1992:121).

1. It acts as a point of orientation by connecting back to previous stretches of discourse and thereby maintaining a coherent point of view.
2. It acts as a point of departure by connecting forward and contributing to the development of later stretches.

Baker's discussion focus of the Theme-Rheme distinction related to translation is text-based rather than the structure of individual clauses. She explains that methods of organization and development in different types of text are reflected in the overall choice of Themes. Having noted the significance of the thematic progression, we must still first shed light on individual clauses for the purpose of investigating how the Theme is realized in the source language text and the target language text.

Summary and future direction

In Chapters 3 and 4 of the dissertation, I examine various authentic examples to find possible answers to the research questions raised in Chapter 1. The authentic examples reveal a complexity of thematic equivalence in translation. However, it can be said that thematic equivalence is not less important than ideational equivalence. To be honest, before becoming aware of the thematic equivalence, I myself had mainly depended on my own intuition and experience in dealing with thematic issues. It seems to me that a majority of translators still tend to pay little attention to the text's Theme-Rheme structure. In this sense, being sensitive to thematic problems is the fundamental first step for translators to tackle various thematic challenges.

The first research question with regard to similarities and differences is partly answered in Chapters 3 and 4 by comparing Themes realized in English and Japanese clauses and their developments. In both English and Japanese, multiple Themes could be basically realized clause-initially. It cannot be ignored that, however, in Japanese the clause final position is also important textually and interpersonally in order to realize structural and mood-making elements.

The second research question is the one I am most tempted to explore further in future. Translators need to be very careful when rendering marked Themes because the degree of markedness varies depending on languages. For instance, thematic circumstances or participants are less marked and more frequent in Japanese than in English because of theme markers, typically *-wa*. In particular, translation of a thematic circumstance of Matter

and absolute Theme in Japanese is challenging for translators who are working from or into English in which frequent use of them is clumsy and unnatural.

Throughout the process of text analyses in this research, I have often been puzzled because even when in the case thematic equivalence can be literally preserved, it is not uncommon to find an instantiated target language text which doesn't reflect lexicogrammatical features of its source language text. Translation is likely to be target reader oriented, and in actual examples, which are products of the complex translation process, dynamic equivalence is more prevalent than formal equivalence. Nida's concept of "the closest natural equivalence" (1964) must be also taken into consideration in order to achieve thematic equivalence.

I have focused mainly on written translation in this research, but the thematic issues are not limited to written work. We can investigate oral translation or interpreting as well. When considering time restrictions especially in simultaneous interpreting, we will surely encounter quite different thematic challenges. The training of translators and interpreters in how to organize a message between two different languages is another area which I would like to develop and apply this research in the near future.

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The full text of Ms. Nagayama's paper is available online at the following website (as of November 11, 2000): <http://ux01.so-net.ne.jp/%7Ea-mizuno/naganuma.html>

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