

Cultural equivalence: its effectiveness and complications -- Has “white gloves” achieved the equivalent effect of “*shiro tabi*”?

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One of the difficulties in translation is to translate culture-specific words or concepts. This paper explores the issue of “equivalent effect” by cultural substitution, focusing especially on its effectiveness by analysing its advantages and disadvantages in literary texts. Two examples are investigated, both from Donald Keene’s translation of “斜陽 (shayo)” by Osamu Dazai. Although the examples discussed in this paper are limited, this study suggests that both benefits and difficulties result from cultural substitution. As is often said, there is no perfect translation. However, when making a decision in translating culture-specific words or concepts, the benefits and difficulties of cultural substitution should be taken into consideration, as it may prove a useful technique in some context.

Introduction

It is often said that the ultimate purpose of translation should be to achieve an “equivalent effect” (Bekku, 1975: 90; Newmark, 1988: 48). In other words, a translator should achieve a similar effect on the target text receiver as the source text has on the source text receiver. However, between languages with greater cultural differences, it may not be easy to achieve this. Even at the word level, there is rarely any one-to-one correspondence between any two languages, as words in each language tend to have different meaning components (Hatim & Mason, 1990: 61; Hirako, 1999: 66). Furthermore, there are culture-specific words and concepts which have no direct equivalents in another language. Bester (1991: 77) expresses the difficulties in translating culturally specific words,

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such as “a plant, a tree, or a special food,” particularly when they have “all kinds of associations” for the source text reader. In this context, as one of the best examples of the achievement of “equivalent effect,” Bekku (1979: 159) takes Donald Keene’s famous translation of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*),” or white split-toed socks, by its cultural substitution “white gloves,” instead of “white socks,” in his translation of the Japanese novel “斜陽 (*shayo*),” or *The Setting Sun*, by Osamu Dazai. At the same time, there are some who do not agree with Keene’s choice, including Murakami and Nakano (Torikai, 1998:156, 157). It seems that the method of achieving “equivalent effect” by cultural substitution is a controversial one in translation.

First of all, this paper explores the notion of “equivalent effect” to identify the relationship between “equivalent effect” and cultural substitution. Then, examples of translation by cultural substitution from Donald Keene’s translation will be examined to study its effectiveness by considering the benefits and limitations. This book was selected because, as mentioned above, his famous translation of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” to “white gloves” has often been cited as a good example of “equivalent effect.”

Equivalent effect

To begin with, it is necessary to attempt to define “equivalent effect” in translation studies. “Equivalent effect” is defined as “a *similar* effect on the target text receiver as the source text is deemed to have on source text receivers” (my emphasis) (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 240, Newmark, 1988: 48). “Similar” is emphasized because, as Nida (1964: 159) asserts, “there are no such things as identical equivalents” between different languages.

Nida’s “functional equivalence” theory

Nida is a leading theorist of the “equivalence of effect” approach to translation (Nord, 1994: 59). Thus, it is worth examining his theory of “dynamic equivalence,” which later he renamed “functional equivalence.”

Nida introduced “dynamic equivalence” to distinguish it from “formal equivalence” (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 7). The latter is a translation approach which pays attention to “the lexical, grammatical or structural form of a source text.” “Dynamic equivalence,” on the other hand, places strong emphasis on “the impact of the translated work on the receiver” (Brannen, 1993: 143). According to Nida, changes in the text, including words and metaphors, and

even omission or addition, are allowed as long as the target text functions in the same manner as the source text (Gentzler, 1993: 54). As an extreme example, in Nida's Bible translation, "lamb" was translated to other "forms or labels," such as "seal" and "pig," in order to convey the message of "God" (Gentzler, 1993: 60). In summary, "equivalent effect" refers to *an intended result* of this "functional equivalence" translation method (my emphasis). At the same time, the term is also used in translation theory to refer to *the procedures or technique* of the "functional equivalence" translation approach (my emphasis) (Newmark, 1988:48).

Cultural equivalence as one of the strategies of "equivalent effect"

According to the theory of "functional equivalence" translation by Nida, as discussed above, some kinds of adjustments in form will be necessary to convey the intended meaning. This is especially applicable to translation between languages with great cultural distance, such as Japanese and English. As Brannen (1993: 146) points out, unlike translation between the Indo-European languages, changing the form is inevitable between languages like English and Japanese. According to Nida and Waard (1986), the changes in form must be made in the following situations: 1) the original form would convey the wrong meaning, or distort the intended meaning, and 2) the culturally specific term is totally unknown in the target culture (cited in Brannen, 1993: 147-148).

One of the strategies to achieve "equivalent effect" used in the latter situation is translation by cultural substitution. This strategy is called "cultural equivalent" (Newmark, 1988:82-83). It involves "replacing a culture-specific item or expression with a target language item which does not have the same propositional meaning" (Baker, 1992: 30).

Examples of "cultural equivalence"

In order to judge the effectiveness of the "cultural equivalent" strategy in achieving an "equivalent effect," actual examples translated by cultural substitutions should be examined. The samples have been collected from Donald Keene's translation of Osamu Dazai's "斜陽 (*shayo*)", or *The Setting Sun*. Examples from the whole text are listed in the appendix. The following have been selected for study in this paper because they are the most significant items.

<u>Original</u>	<u>Keene's translation</u>
1. 白足袋 (<i>shirotabi</i>) (p. 49)	white gloves (p. 48)
2. 地下足袋 (<i>jikatabi</i>) (p. 71)	sneakers (p. 70)

In the novel, when a local village doctor makes his first house call to the mother of the main character Kazuko, “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” is mentioned in order to describe what the doctor is wearing. The main character’s family used to belong to “華族 (*kazoku*),” a privileged family or the Japanese aristocrat, before the Second World War. This is why the local doctor was wearing formal attire when seeing the mother. Bekku (1979: 159) stresses that Keene’s translation of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” to “white gloves”, not to “white socks”, is a good example of “equivalent effect”. Although “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” and “white socks” are physically more equivalent, i.e. they are both something white to be worn on the feet, the connotation of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” is formal, while that of “white socks” is casual.

Thus “white gloves” are more functionally equivalent to “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)”. The benefit of this translation is that the associated image from “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” has been conveyed by its cultural substitution “white gloves”. Similarly, Keene translated “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*, or rubber-soled split-toed socks)” to “sneakers.” When the main character, Kazuko, had to wear them for the first time during the war, she described them as “びっくりするほど、はき心地がよく (*bikkurisuru hodo hakigokochi ga yoku*, or surprisingly comfortable” (Dazai, 1965: 70, 71). Both “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” and “sneakers” are something comfortable, practical to wear on the feet, having rubber soles, in contrast to something formal and uncomfortable. Again, here the emphasis was placed, not on the actual object or its propositional meaning, but its function and its connotations, i.e. comfort and casualness.

As another strategy, unknown words, like “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” or “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*),” can be left as loan words in italics and explained in the text, or with a footnote. However, description of the object cannot convey evoked or any kind of associative meaning. As Bekku (1975: 72, 81) points out, in literature it is often more important to achieve the “equivalent effect” at the “psychological” level, such as with connotation and emotional tone, rather than the “physical” level, such as with denotation and fact. If they were given a description in the text or footnote, the most important factor, the psychological one, would be lost

in the translation. It is also often recommended that in translation of novels, long explanations of unfamiliar words be avoided (Brannen, 1993: 147-148, Metevelis, 1994: 183).

Benefit of “cultural equivalence”

From the discussion so far, it can be said, as Baker (1992: 31) points out, that the advantage of “cultural equivalence” is that “it gives the reader a concept with which s/he can identify, something familiar and appealing,” and likely to have a *similar* impact on the target reader (my emphasis).

Metevelis (1994: 183) also admits that there are cases in which a translation by cultural substitution is the only acceptable option in translation. He gives an example of ineffective rendering of a sentence from Yasunari Kawabata’s novel, “滑り岩 (*suberi-iwa*),” or *Sliding Rock: the barber, whose face was like a pickled cucumber seasoned in sake lees* (奈良漬の瓜 or *narazuke no uri*). Here, the feature of fine creases in his skin is important to give the reader the image of an old man. The underlined dictionary-like descriptive explanation does not convey this image at all. Instead, Metevelis (1994: 183-184) believes “a prune-faced barber” is the closest English equivalent. According to him, while “奈良漬の瓜 (*narazuke no uri*)” will be sacrificed, in the “prune-faced barber” translation, both “the expression and the sense of the original image” will be better retained in the translation than “a pickled cucumber seasoned in sake lees”.

Limitation of “cultural equivalence”

On the other hand, some limitations with the “cultural equivalent” translation, especially with “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” and “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*),” have been identified. Both words appear more than three times in the text, and have significant roles, giving many connotations or evoked meanings to the audience. For example, every time the local doctor visits the mother, what he is wearing is mentioned in the text. “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” is especially emphasised three out of four times when he makes house calls. According to Torikai (1998: 157), while women wear white *tabi*, or split-toed socks, men usually wear black or navy *tabi*. After researching many literary works, Nakano has reached the conclusion that “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” also has other connotations, such as feminine and gentle, worn especially by such particular professionals as artists, and doctors, Shinto priests (as cited in Torikai, 1998: 157). Metevelis (1994: 182) also

indicates other symbolic connotations may be lost from the story “if the translator arbitrarily transforms ‘*tabi*’ into ‘gloves’.”

Similarly, “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” also appears several times in the text, and has significant connotations, more than just comfort and casualness as found with “sneakers”. “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” is normally worn by people involved in physical work. Especially, for Kazuko, “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” is associated with her memory of the war, and more importantly it is a symbol of disgrace and misery. Since she was a daughter in a wealthy family, she did not have to wear them until she was conscripted and forced to work during the war. After the war, as her family’s status as “華族 (*kazoku*),” or privileged family, disappeared, she had to work in her little vegetable patch in “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*).” Thus, “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” also has the connotations of inferior, working class, and war. In both cases of “white gloves” and “sneakers,” important connotations have been lost in the translation. As Baker (1992: 26) suggests, special care needs to be taken when dealing with a culturally specific word, especially when it plays a prominent part in a given text. Or, as Newmark (1988: 83) points out, the cultural substitution may not be useful when the term is important in a given text.

How, then, would it be possible to convey all the associations the Japanese reader will get from words like “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” and “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” to the target language audience? This problem may not be limited to the case of “cultural equivalence.” As is often expressed, a certain amount of loss of meaning is often unavoidable in translation (Baker, 1992: 57). It seems that some, and certainly not all of its associations or images, can be reproduced in the target language by its cultural substitution, like “white gloves” or “sneakers.”

Another disadvantage of cultural substitution may be that the translation has eliminated cultural distinctions between source language and target language. According to Torikai (1998: 157), the problem underlying the translation of “white gloves” is that the cultural meaning of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” is not that simple. Nakano suggests its literal translation, “white spilt-toed socks,” as one of the possible translations of “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” (as cited in Torikai, 1998:158). Torikai (1998: 158) then indicates that the literal translation might provide the reader with greater cultural awareness, and some sense of foreignness. There are certainly some readers who want to enjoy the foreignness, and exotic feeling associated with the original culture, or simply to learn about the other

culture. For example, if “Turkish Delight” is replaced with some more familiar Japanese sweet for the Japanese reader, such as “大福餅 (*daifukumochi*)” or “みつ豆 (*mitumame*),” the translation will certainly lose its exotic mood (Brannen and Sawanobori, 1988: 72). Newmark (1988: 48) points out when the purpose of the source language text and that of the translation are different, translation by cultural substitution will not be appropriate. Accordingly, when the purpose of the original text is to provide literary pleasure, while the purpose of the translation is to help the reader to understand a different culture, the technique of cultural equivalent translation may not be the best strategy. Thus, it is important for a translator to analyse the intended readership to decide what kind of strategy should be taken.

Acceptability of translation in a different period

Nida (1964:161) points out that because “languages are constantly changing and stylistic preferences undergo continual modification, a translation acceptable in one period is often quite unacceptable at a later time.” Therefore, it should also be noted that the novel “斜陽 (*shayo*)” was translated in 1958. At that time, the Japanese language and culture were regarded as “inscrutable” (Metevelis, 1994: 182). Keene’s choice of “white gloves” or “sneakers” may be the result of his readership analysis.

Bekku (1979: 159-160) suggests that there is no need to translate it as “white gloves” for today’s readers because Japanese culture is nowadays being introduced overseas and is becoming more popular in other countries. For “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)”, “sneakers” are not an appropriate cultural substitution now that they are expensive fashion items.

At the same time, as Jacquemond (1992), a leading theorist of postcolonial translation studies, remarks, Keene’s translation may have been influenced by the power differentials between cultures, i.e. between “hegemonic” or dominant or more powerful cultures and “dominated” or less powerful cultures (cited in Robinson, 1997: 234). According to Jacquemond, the hegemonic culture often tries to integrate cultural products of dominated cultures into their own culture. As can be seen in the appendix, many Japanese culturally specific items appearing in Dazai’s “斜陽 (*shayo*)” were translated into something familiar to the English reader by Keene. However, the power relation between Japanese and English languages may have changed since 1958. It may be worth comparing translated works translated during different periods.

Further issues with “cultural equivalence”

Another concern with “cultural equivalence” is the issue of who judges whether the effect on the target reader is similar to that on the original reader. First of all, as Hatim and Mason (1990: 7) recognize, actual effects on receivers of the original text are difficult to “gauge.” Bekku (1975: 94) also points out that the effect on the source language readers is not necessarily objective, absolute and universal. This means that even a word, “白足袋 (*shirotabi*),” may evoke all sorts of different associations and responses in different receivers depending on their own experiences. Emotional perception is especially subjective (Copeland, 1997: 429). This is why each translation of a work will be different from the same original text. However, as a guideline Bekku (1975: 95, 1979: 158) suggests that what a translator has to do is simply to attempt to achieve a similar effect, which s/he received as the original receiver, onto the target language receiver, since s/he is the receptor as well as the speaker to the target language readers. In other words, a translator has to be able to play both roles adequately.

Conclusion

In this paper, the notion of “equivalent effect” in translation was explored, and one of its strategies, “cultural equivalent” translation, has been discussed. Two main examples from Donald Keene’s translation of “斜陽 (*shayo*)” were examined to judge their effectiveness by analysing their advantages and limitations. Although the samples examined are limited, it is reasonable to suggest that translation by “cultural substitution” may be an effective way to achieve a similar impact on the target reader.

However, it will be impossible to convey all the associations the original receptors find in a particular word, such as “白足袋 (*shirotabi*),” to the target language audience in any translation. Because of this, what should be retained in a target language translation requires assessment on a case-by-case basis. If “白足袋 (*shirotabi*)” and “地下足袋 (*jikatabi*)” were literally translated, their important connotations, such as “formality” or “comfort,” would be lost in the translation. “Cultural equivalent” translation makes it possible to convey not all but at least some connotations to the target language audience. At the same time, there will of course be cases where a physical factor, or the object itself, is as important as its connotations. In such a case, it should be translated literally

or given a description. Thus, a translator has to decide what s/he can let go, and what should above all be retained in each context.

There have also been some limitations identified with the “cultural equivalence” strategy. These include the loss of cultural meaning. When the target audience’s purpose for reading the text is to enjoy foreignness, and understand its culture, “cultural equivalence” will not be an appropriate strategy. Another problem is that the effect on an individual reader is basically subjective, and it is difficult to measure this effect. More importantly, “cultural equivalence” becomes problematic when the original word plays a significant role in a given text. Whether translation by cultural substitution will be the best option will depend on the context and intended readership. Thus, it is important first of all to assess the significance and implications of the word in a given text. However, to be able to do this adequately, a translator is required to not only have a good knowledge of the source and target languages, but also of their cultures (Witte, 1994: 69, Brannen and Sawanobori, 1988: 125). In addition, as Larson (1984: 514) emphasises, translators must have skills in cross-language transfer. That is to say, the ability to find a phrase like “prune-faced” in the target language for “奈良漬の瓜 (*narazuke no uri*, or pickled gourd seasoned in sake lees)” is essential for translators.

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APPENDIX: Samples of Cultural Equivalent Translation

The following samples are from Donald Keene's translation of "斜陽 (*shayo*)," or *The Setting Sun*, in 1958. ¹⁾

N	Original	Dictionary Translation ²⁾	Keene's Translation
1	竹藪 (<i>takeyabu</i>) (p.23)	bamboo thicket	stakes (p.22)
2	お供え (<i>osonae</i>) (p.27)	an offering	the service (p.26)
3	笹 <i>sasa</i> (p.29)	bamboo grass/leaf	iris stalk (p.28)
4	縁側 (<i>engawa</i>) (p.29)	veranda	Porch (p.28)
5	座敷 (<i>zashiki</i>) (p.45)	a room floored with <i>tatami</i> mats	sitting room (p.44)
6	白足袋 (<i>shirotabi</i>) (p.49)	white <i>tabi</i>	white gloves (p.48)
7	床 (<i>toko</i>) (p.51)	bedding	bed (p.50)
8	障子 (<i>shoji</i>) (p.59)	a paper sliding door	blinds (p.58)
9	ヨイトマケ (<i>yoitomake</i>) (p.71)	Not found ³⁾	coolie labour (p.70)
10	地下足袋 (<i>jikatabi</i>) (p.71, p.73, p. 81, p. 89)	rubber-soled socks with the big toe separate	sneaker (p.70, p.72, p.80, p.88)
11	ねむの花 (<i>nemu no hana</i>) (p.85)	(flower of) a silk tree	hibiscus (p.84)
12	着物 (<i>kimono</i>) (p.95)	<i>kimono</i>	clothes (p.94)
13	来来軒 (<i>rairaiken</i>) (p.111)	Not found ⁴⁾	China Mansions (p.110)
14	シュウマイ (<i>shumai</i>) (p.111)	Not found ⁵⁾	Chow Mein (p.110)
15	焼酎 (<i>shochu</i>) (p.113)	a clear liquor (distilled from sweet potatoes, rice, buckwheat, etc.)	gin (p.112)
16	小春日和 (<i>koharubiyori</i>) (p.187)	warm autumn weather	Indian summer (p.186)
17	簾 (<i>sudare</i>) (p.201)	a reed screen, bamboo blind	porch blind (p.200)
18	松茸 (<i>matsutake</i>) (p.211)	<i>matsutake</i> mushroom	mushroom (p.210)

1) Dazai. O., *Shayo (The Setting Sun)*, Modern Japanese Literature English/Japanese Bilingual Collection 8. Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 1965.

2) *Kenkyusha's Japanese-English Dictionary*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1996.

3) "ヨイトマケ(*yoitomake*)" means "levelling the ground by raising and lowering a heavy hammer." (*Sanseido's Japanese Dictionary*)

4) "来来軒 (*rairaiken*)" is a typical name of Chinese restaurant in Japan.

5) "シュウマイ (*shumai*)" is a popular Chinese dish eaten in Japan.