

Multiple Layers of Meaning
-- Toward a Deepening of the "Sense" Theory of Interpreting -- ¹⁾

Masaomi KONDO
Daito-Bunka University

1. Introduction

In this presentation, I am restraining myself to making only one point, resulting from the questionnaire survey²⁾ on Japanese conference interpreters regarding their work from their native Japanese into English. What struck me most in the result of this survey was that, while all the respondents who professed preference in working into English cite easier understanding of the source language, i.e., their mother tongue, Japanese, close to a third of the total respondents complained that Japanese speakers often are too vague, too obscure and too ambiguous to render their utterances into English. Please remember that Japanese is their mother tongue, and that about 85 percent of the respondents are veteran interpreters, having worked more than 1,000 days and many of them even over 20 years.

It is true that Japanese utterances often leave many things unsaid because of syntactical factors such as the frequent and entirely natural absence of the subject of many sentences, and non-indication of almost all the nouns being singular or plural. But even after dealing with these and other linguistic difficulties (like considerable differences in word order) in one way or another, there is a great deal of ambiguity left in Japanese utterances. In many cases what seems to mean linguistically deviates from what the speaker really intends to say.

My point is: that we need to think of multiple layers of 'meaning' in understanding what we do when we interpret, instead of just saying that interpreters are to involve themselves with the 'meaning' or the 'sense' (Selescovitch), and 'das Gemeinte' or 'that which is meant' (Helga Kirchhoff), as if this solved all the problems for us.

KONDO Masaomi, "Multiple Layers of Meaning -- Toward a Deepening of the "Sense" Theory of Interpreting." *Interpretation Studies*, No. 6, December 2006, Pages 175-182.

(c) 2006 by the Japan Association for Interpretation Studies

<Post-conference addendum>

A panelist expressed dismay on this difficulty of understanding native-tongue utterances at the summarizing panel discussion in Beijing, while some Chinese participants expressed sympathy to this difficulty after the session where I had presented this paper. I feel that we must take this expressed difficulty as genuine, and as a significant interpreting phenomenon, and try to explain it adequately, since the survey respondents no doubt have experienced this difficulty probably rather frequently or at least at some points in their interpreting career. One Chinese observer suggested that the difficulty arises only when attempting to interpret these utterances into English (or possibly to any other language), indicating as a reason for the difficulty distinct differences in the way these different languages impose different modes of thinking on the users of these languages to varying degrees, as well as different aspects of a thought to be explicitly expressed by them (apparently from the same simple linguistic differences as those mention above). Further development is awaited.

2. Two Episodes

In raising the issue of multiple layers of meaning, I wish to introduce two episodes from post-war relations between Japan and the United States. One resulted in an aborted diplomatic crisis, and the other in a major catastrophe due, at least to a large measure, to the interpreting involved.

My first episode comes from my novice days, at an ancient time. I was recruited to become an escort interpreter in the US for visiting Japanese citizens, and during the course of brief training sessions in the Department of State, I had my mentor tell this episode. The late Mr. James Wickel was a staff interpreter in the State Department, a speaker of English as his mother tongue but with probably better Japanese than many native Japanese speakers.

This is what he said in the course of the briefing: There once was a visiting Japanese delegation discussing fishing disputes with the US. The then Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries of Japan propounded his view, and Mr. Wickel was at the microphone. When the Japanese Minister came to an end, the American chief negotiator exclaimed at Mr. Wickel: "What the hell is he trying to say?" -- What do you think Mr. Wickel did? He calmly interpreted this very outburst into Japanese! His explanation for what he did was this: "I am not going to *interpret* the Minister's statement for him. That's *his* job."

Mr. Wickel's problem is echoed in the said survey. One respondent says: "His or

her intentions, and what he or she wants to convey, is hard to grasp, making it extremely difficult to interpret.” (J22) Another respondent says: “I have difficulties when the Japanese speaker speaks horribly, making it impossible to see what he is trying to say.” (K9)

What Mr. Wickel did was to follow the linguistic expression rather closely, although never attempting a word-for-word correspondence – no interpreter of his caliber would even try that. He did interpret the Minister on one level of meaning, but refused to interpret the same statement at a different, deeper level. And we are faced with the need to distinguish different layers of the meaning, instead of simply saying ‘meaning’ or ‘das Gemeinte’.

I now turn to the second episode. This incident has been thoroughly exposed in scholarly and journalistic writings (summarized, e.g., in Prof. Torikai’s book³) and has attained the status of *locus classicus* in describing miscommunication across the Pacific.

It was in 1970 that the then Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Sato, went over to the States to confer with President Nixon. After having conceded to Mr. Sato to revert the Okinawan Islands back to Japan, President Nixon pressed the Prime Minister in private conversation with only the interpreter present to reduce the rapidly expanding Japanese exports of textile goods to the United States. The ‘torrential’ export of textile goods to the United States had prompted American textile manufacturers to apply a lot of pressure on the President to do something about it. After the President made a plea, the Prime Minister is reported to have responded by resorting to common but fateful bureaucratic language of Japanese parliamentary debate, saying something like: “I will deal with the matter in a forward-looking manner.” (‘善処しましょう *Zensho shimashou*’). Maybe the Prime Minister was a little more emphatic in a positive tone of voice, because the English interpretation is reported to have come out as: “I will take care of it.”

In the mind of the Prime Minister, this wording did not commit himself to anything. Well, you just say it in that kind of situation, you know... The President, however, not well versed in Japanese political language, or political double-talk, some would say, did take it more literally, and expected his counterpart to do something specific to curb the flow of textile goods across the Pacific, like persuading Japanese textile manufacturers and exporters to exercise a bit of ‘self restraint’ in their export drive to opt for a more ‘orderly marketing.’

Having discovered that Sato was not about to do anything of the sort, Nixon felt betrayed and thought all Japanese politicians liars and utterly untrustworthy. This

soon resulted in two waves of the Nixon shocks the other way across the Pacific in the early 1970s. When Nixon decided to establish diplomatic ties with Beijing (severing its formal ties with Taiwan), he only asked his Secretary of State to call Sato on the phone while Nixon was announcing his policy change to the press. When soon afterwards he decided to abrogate the dollar's convertibility to gold, he only gave Japan a few hours' perfunctory notice before the formal press release. These 'shocks' inflicted considerable political as well as economic damages on Japan.

A lot has been made of the second case, from a rather simplistic accusation of the mistranslation by the interpreter to blaming the two primary participants for their inadequacy in cross-cultural communications skills. Nixon is said to have never come to a cogent understanding of why the whole episode occurred, while Sato remained rather nonchalant to the last in his memoirs.

Nixon's Secretary of State in 1970 was Dr. Henry Kissinger. When he reminisced some 30 years later, saying: "There is a problem in communication between Japan and the United States," he knew what he was talking about.⁴⁾

How should we view the behavior of the interpreter in the second context? He went on to interpret Sato's wording on the level where angels fear to tread, i.e., where Mr. Wickel refused to involve himself. And he blundered in the final analysis: He brought about a diplomatic furor later; he could not serve to deepen genuine understanding between the two important partners, often out of step with each other.

<Post-conference addendum>

One participant at the Beijing conference approached me after the session and suggested that the Japanese government should definitely have tried to explain to the American counterpart that it was a case of simple mis-interpretation by the attending interpreter to recover of the honor of the Japanese politicians, most notably Mr. Sato. In my reading on the episode, I do not remember encountering this argument, nor anything to suggest that such an official action was taken. Since it was discussed so much in Japanese journalism in terms of the speculation about a conspiracy involving the two Chinese ideographs used in writing Okinawa and sen'i (textile), both of which have a sign signifying "threat" in their left-hand side (radical), it can be safely assumed the two governments were well aware of what had happened, and most probably a lot went back and forth unofficially.

That nothing was said officially (as far as I know) may need some explanation. Possibly that the interpreter was a Foreign Minister staff member had something to do with it, bureaucracy perennially trying to protect itself. But it may also have been

the case of Mr. Sato not wanting to open up the whole issue, or possibly he did not care much to reduce the damage he at least partly had caused or to redeem the honor of Japanese politicians. It is difficult to imagine that Nixon would have welcomed such an official explanation, exposing his weakness in dealing with persons from a radically different culture, when he prided himself in his foreign policy achievements.

In the final analysis it seems neither plausible nor meaningful if such an official *ex-post* account, probably seen as an attempt to vindicate Sato one-sidedly, would have led to anything very positive, including the resumption of the whole negotiations, after the Okinawan islands had been reverted back to Japan and the damage had been done, barring some quick and ingenious method of damage control. One seems to be able only to learn the lessons from the blunder committed and avoid recurrence of similar communications and diplomatic catastrophes, although Prof. Torikai's aforementioned book lists too many such calamities to draw comfort in the aptitude of the bureaucracy or Japanese people more generally to learn such lessons.

3. In Lieu of Concluding Remarks

Thus, we come to the point where we are forced to recognize that there are perhaps a number of layers of meaning to utterances. We should at least distinguish three layers:

1. the lexical meaning of the individual words used (Selescovitch calls this the primary meaning);
2. the meaning in the sense of (again after Selescovitch) 'semantic content,' 'concept,' 'thought,' 'information contained in the utterance' (D. Selescovitch, *Interpreting for International Conferences*, 1978, various pages); and
3. the implied meaning, specifically including the 'intention' of the speaker in uttering the words.

The problem for the interpreter, at least when Japanese utterances are involved, is that the second and third layers of meaning often diverge. And I feel that Japanese interpreters are ideally placed to raise this point, hopefully to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interpreting process.

The interpreter in the Sato-Nixon encounter functioned on the third layer, taking too much risk, and erred. Mr. Wickel refused to interpret the visiting Japanese Fisheries Minister in its third layer, and left that to the primary participant. He came out unscathed himself and without causing a catastrophe.

My point is that we should clearly distinguish at least these three layers of meaning. Furthermore, I would tentatively posit that interpreters *under ordinary*

circumstances should not involve themselves with the third layer.

I say “under ordinary circumstances.” What are not so ordinary circumstances where we could safely try to function on the third layer? I can think of cases where you know the area of the speech very well, where you know the speaker very well, even his world views, AND the specific tasks at the speaker’s hand. I have had some fortunate occasions when these favorable conditions indeed were met. But even then, the interpreter has to exercise utmost and most cautious, albeit quick, judgment.

One respondent in my survey mentions cases where the speaker himself seems uncertain as to what he really wants to say, i.e., in his third layer of meaning. This person says: “It’s difficult when words are vague, making it impossible to judge whether the person is just a vague speaker or is intentionally being vague in what he says.” (K21) I once interpreted simultaneously a Japanese chairperson of a session who often oscillated whether he should go to a final vote on an item on the agenda or continue the discussion further. I was silently shouting at him: “Which way do you want, man! Make up your mind!”

I have no prescription for these difficult cases. We are accused of being a poor professional, as one respondent says: “When the Japanese speaker is horrible, without clear meaning, it makes it very difficult to interpret, and I feel bad when non-Japanese do not understand this difficulty and blame me.” (J2) Sometimes Japanese interpreters are blamed by colleagues in other booths who take relay from us. One respondent relates: “I have heard a complaint from colleagues taking relay from our English interpretation to the effect that it is very hard to understand.” (K3) Of course, she may really be producing poor-quality interpretation, but she might in fact be a true pro in being vague in her final rendition. Well, you have good days and bad days. However, one respondent gives us a cheerful example: “It’s hard to interpret unintelligible Japanese speakers. But sometimes organizers and members of the audience come out to admire me on how I have interpreted the very vague original speeches into clear and understandable English.” (K25) This commending person must have understood both the Japanese original and the English product.

But I suppose we could try to be clear in language but vague in the third layer of meaning in our target language rendition as best we can. I know there are ways also in English of *saying NO without saying NO*. I hope to be enlightened as to what strategy we could adopt under such circumstances.

Here I merely note that this discrepancy between layers 2 and 3 seems to arise also in other languages. I only cite a few linguists who seem to deal with the third layer of meaning more fully: Paul Grice, an enigmatic intellectual giant (according to

a linguist-philosopher colleague of mine at my university) who spoke of implicature or implication; Deborah Tannen, who developed and popularized causes of misunderstanding in a mono-lingual communications situation, particularly between man and woman; and a Japanese linguist, Minoru Yasui, who pondered and meandered on 'meaning beyond words (言外の意味)'. William Empson noted "Seven Types of Ambiguity" in poems back in 1947 (W. Empson, 1947, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London: Chatto and Windus) but I suppose meaning in poems is inherently many-layered. (However, he identified very succinctly the functions of ambiguity in ordinary speech when he said, "An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule *witty or deceitful*." (italics added) (Ibid., p. 1)

Before I conclude my presentation, I cannot resist a temptation to cite one example to hi-light the difference between the second and the third layers of meaning. There are literally millions and one ways of saying 'I love you.' Interpreters should give all these different versions as they are in their rendition (if, of course, the lovers employed interpreters to exchange their words of love). To reduce all the milliard of expressions of love to simply 'I love you' would make this world indeed very dull, and we would not want to be part of the conspiracy to make this world less exciting.

At one time, Japanese men are reputed to have proposed marriage by saying: "Can you cook miso-soup (soybean soup) for me?" Miso-soup was a must in the standard Japanese breakfast menu in those days. The interpretation had to be "Can you cook miso-soup for me?" or maybe "Are you willing to prepare miso-soup for me?" but not ever simply and mundanely as "I want to marry you."

This one version of "I love you" ('今日は月がきれいですね' or 'The moon is especially beautiful tonight,' was shown in one power-point slide) was thrown into the outline at the last minute at a suggestion of a good friend of mine, himself a novelist cum literary critic. Soseki Natsume is arguably the greatest and even now most popular novelist in modern Japan in the early 20th century. He had taught English at a college in southern Japan before he became a professor of English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo and later a full-time author. At one time he asked his college students how they would translate 'I love you' into Japanese. Unsophisticated students gave a number of variations of 'I love you,' like the equivalent of 'I am very fond of you,' etc. Prof. Natsume was not satisfied. At the end he said, "I would translate it as '今日は月がきれいですね', whose layer 2 meaning would be: "We have a beautiful moon this evening," or its variations.

The task for us if we are to go into English from the original Japanese reference to

the beautiful moon is, I think, to translate it as 'we have a beautiful moon this evening', and is not to reduce it to 'I love you' by going into layer 3. In the final analysis, we cannot be completely sure if he means to say 'I love you.' He just may be, or may well be, really referring only to the pretty moon.

One last word about the future prospect. Some Japanese insist that speaking vaguely is a virtue even when they freely admit that non-Japanese guests and businessmen working in Japan profess to see everything in a rather fuzzy way. And even when the girl is hard put as to how to respond when her boyfriend refers to a beautiful moon. Moreover it is not only poets and novelists, like Soseki or Nobel laureates Kawabata and Oe, but also active and successful international businesspersons who value 'vagueness'. So, I reckon this trait of Japanese utterances as well as resulting discrepancy between layers 2 and 3 is here to stay in Japan, as probably in other languages if only to a less dramatic extent. Interpreters should be ready to deal with it theoretically as well as practically in the daily exercise of our profession.

Thank you for your kind attention.

※Professor Kondo, one of the founding members of JAIS, is currently teaching at Daito Bunka University, Tokyo, and has published a number of papers on interpreting. He can be reached at: <omikondo@amber.plala.or.jp>

Notes:

- 1) This paper is a revised version of the author's presentation given at the 6th National Conference and International Forum on Interpreting, "Toward Quality Interpretation in the 21st Century", at the University of International Business and Economics, Oct. 20-21, 2006, Beijing, China.
- 2) 近藤正臣、「B 言語への通訳：日本の経験——アンケート調査報告」『通訳研究』(in Japanese), No. 5, 2005. pp. 261-283. Kondo, M. (2005) 'Interpreting into B language: Japanese Experience' (in English), *Conference Interpretation and Translation*, Vol. 7(2), 2005. pp. 3-28.
- 3) Torikai, K., 1998, *Kotobaga maneku kukusai masatsu (International frictions brought about by words)*, Tokyo, the Japan Times, pp. 25-34.
- 4) H. Kissinger, 'US bases important for Asian security,' *the Daily Yomiuri*, 21 September 2001)