

Some Untranslatable Aspects of the Japanese Language A General Semantics View

Yuzuru Katagiri

Volume 33, Number 1, mars 1988

Traduction et interprétation au Japon
Translation and Interpretation in Japan

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/003286ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/003286ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Katagiri, Y. (1988). Some Untranslatable Aspects of the Japanese Language : a General Semantics View. *Meta*, 33(1), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.7202/003286ar>

SOME UNTRANSLATABLE ASPECTS OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE A GENERAL SEMANTICS VIEW¹

YUZURU KATAGIRI
Kyoto Seika College, Kyoto, Japan

Benjamin Lee Whorf says, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages". What the English-speaking people call "snow" is designated by many different names by the Eskimos. The Navajos have just one word to refer to "airplane", "pilot" and "dragonfly". The fish-eating Japanese differentiate fresh and dried squids by calling them by two names : *ika* and *surume*. On the other hand the Japanese have no corresponding words for the English "beef" or "pork", but have to label them descriptively as "cattle meat" or "pig meat". Comparisons in content words are easy. But differences in syntax and grammatical devices are more subtle and it is harder to see how they affect our vision of the world. I will try to show, in one simple sentence pattern, how demonstrative pronouns in the Japanese language dissect nature.



While the English language divides the world into two by this/that or here/there, Japanese divides it into three : *kono*, *sono* and *ano*. This dissecting is not done by distance as in English, but by the idea of territory or belonging : *kono hito* (the person belonging to my territory), *sono hito* (the person belonging to your territory), and *ano hito* (the person belonging to somebody else's territory).

To the above, we may add the question word *dono* and say *dono hito* (which person). In the same way, we refer to "things" in my territory, in your territory, in somebody's territory, in which territory, as : *kore*, *sore*, *are* and *dore*. "Places" are characterized as : *koko*, *soko*, *asoko* and *doko* (my place, your place, somebody's place, where). This system of dissecting the world which we call "*ko-so-a-do*" was first made clear in the 1930's by a Gestalt psychologist, Dr Kanae Sakuma, who was not satisfied with the then current view of the Japanese language based on Latin grammar.

When people depend so much upon translation as in present-day Japan, they tend to believe that there are no words which cannot be translated. They expect each word in

one language to have its equivalent in another. If there is none, they try to impose their own way of dividing the world on another language. In the case of *ko-so-a-do*, "*kono* table" may be rather safely translated as "this table", and "*ano* table" as "that table". But often one cannot tell if "*sono* table" is near to or far from the speaker. It is easy for the Japanese to equate English "it" with something which is neither "this" nor "that". Beginning students of English, if taught through translation, often say "it table" meaning "*sono* table". Or they even say "its table" or write "it's table" because *no* in *sono* means the possessive case.

The above is an example of the many pitfalls of teaching a foreign language by the grammar-translation method. Also, not many teachers are well aware of the fact that explaining in a meta-language is often more difficult than simply pointing at the object or giving examples of expressions in their contexts. Avoiding translation, I teach first-level English in the Graded Direct Method developed by I.A. Richards and Christine Gibson, using *English Through Pictures* as a textbook.

The respect for other people's territory may be seen as one of the characteristics of Japanese culture. This reminds me of a newspaper clipping from the *New York Times*, April 4, 1985, "Japan Trade Barriers Called Mainly Cultural", sent to me by Charlotte Read of the Institute of General Semantics: the article quotes from experts who believe that the Japanese market is "impenetrable". Japan is known as a tightly organized society, where each member respects and avoids violating the other's territory. This makes the distributing system more complex in actual practice, and makes it difficult even for a Japanese newcomer to break into the market. (I myself have a similar problem, that of being accepted by the already established Japanese language specialists, because I am usually considered to be a "poet" and thus belonging to another territory.)

Another point I want to make is that Japanese basically has no pronouns corresponding to English "he" or "she": it has only one word *hito* (person).

Kono hito wa Korzybski desu.

(The person in my territory is Korzybski.)

Sono hito wa Kendig desu.

(The person in your territory is Kendig.)

This does not necessarily mean that the Japanese are not conscious of sexual differences, or are less sexist. In some fields of activities, we are less concerned about sexual matters, but in other areas more. Mixed bathing has been taken for granted in many public baths and hot springs. Breast-feeding was seen on trains and in waiting rooms and other public places until 1945. But in 1940, when I was 10 years old, I was laughed at by my friends because I was seen buying food in a market. I did not know it was considered to be a girl's job. On visiting the U.S.A. in 1985, the sight of police women wearing guns and women driving buses and heavy trucks was very unusual to my Japanese eyes.

In Japan, women's language is very different from men's. Some western males who are married to Japanese females speak Japanese fluently, but like ladies, and are laughed at. *Onna-kotoba*, the women's speech, is clearly marked from the "standard" (men's) Japanese in the choice of vocabulary and specially in the use of honorifics. Because women have been considered to be of lower status in society, everything they say to and about men is in honorifics. Even for the same act, the verbs and grammatical constructions are different: when men "do" something, the verb is *suru*, but for women talking about other people's actions, the verb *nasaru* is used. This makes it sound as if men are always doing something important, while women are concerned about trivial things. You may guess to some degree, from Lafcadio Hearn's English versions of Japanese stories, how women of the old days spoke in honorifics to their "lords" — men in general.

The use of honorifics is not only a problem between women and men : one always has to choose which degree of politeness is proper in a given situation, measuring how superior or how inferior, how psychologically distant or close the listener is. Making an "objective" statement in a live situation is extremely difficult. More energy is used in trying to be polite than in talking about what is "out there". I personally try to develop a more neutral kind of Japanese by using fewer honorifics without being too impolite, going between masculine and feminine speech. Also I usually look for a simpler way of saying the same thing, hoping a sort of "Basic" Japanese will come up in the process. These experiments give some people the impression that I speak Japanese like an American missionary does.

Some readers may wonder if the absence of "respect language" in English makes it difficult to make the proper decisions in translation into Japanese. (What levels of politeness should be used if you do not know exactly what the relations between protagonists in a given scene are ?) This, to me, is a welcome chance to "democratize" the Japanese language. I hope translations from English will develop a sort of Japanese language which is "respectful" but more "objective". We take in through translation what is missing in our own culture. No one language is complete, as Ezra Pound says. "The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension." And he showed in his *ABC of Reading* how European literature developed out of translations, and how English literature lives on translation. So, it seems to me that Seidensticker went too far when he reduced the number of times the hero wept in his translation of the *Tale of Genji*, because he was afraid of giving American readers the impression of Genji's being too much of a sissy. But isn't that what the too masculine American culture needs ?

What makes Japanese so difficult for foreigners to learn is its writing system, which is a combination of Chinese characters and Japanese phonetic notation called *kana*. Our ancestors learned that there was such a thing as writing from their contact with the Chinese in about the 6th century A.D. And we borrowed high order abstraction words from Chinese, while the structure of the Japanese language remained unchanged. Out of a kind of shorthand notation of Chinese characters, our ancestors developed a special system of syllabic writing to present the sounds of Japanese.

In principle, one ideograph stands for one meaning. Then we have to have as many ideographs as there are "meanings" in the whole world ! The Chinese words have the advantage of being more precise, and they encourage identification because (1) being pictographic, some characters look like things themselves, (2) some characters are so elaborate and intricate in structure, you may feel that *all* the necessary knowledge is contained in them, (3) one has to invest so much time and energy just to memorize thousands of ideographs that one may not feel like going beyond those symbols. In Japan until the end of World War II, to be educated meant to know more than 3 000 Chinese characters.

This situation was seen as "a barrier" to "the transmission of knowledge and ideas" by the United States Education Commission to Japan in 1947. Reform was introduced, at their suggestion, to reduce the number of Chinese characters in daily use to less than 2 000. Perhaps those American educators saw the role played by high-sounding, important-looking Chinese-borrowed rhetoric, in giving the Japanese nation a false idea of World War II : "the Words of the Emperor" were all written in the style of classical Chinese, incomprehensible to most people, who were forced to stand and listen to "The Holy Words" ; the language of the military also followed the Chinese model, which was

considered to be precise, condensed and manly. With the swing to more nationalistic feeling recently, right-wing leaders want to have more "Chinese" words back in use².

Because women were considered to have lower status in society, they were kept away from this Chinese influence, which was the privilege of the elite. While men were trying to compose literature in Chinese, women kept their day-to-day records of their private world in *kana*, out of which grew the literature of court ladies of the Heian period, such as Lady Murasaki's *Tales of Genji*. This awakened men to the possibility of writing "Japanese" literature in Japanese.

Even Westerners can tell that *yamatokotoba* ("pure" Japanese) in phonetic writing looks different from *kango* ("Chinese" Japanese) in ideographs :

やまことば 漢語

Kana gives the impression of being fluid and slippery (and feminine to us Japanese), while Chinese characters look more angular and solid (and masculine to us Japanese). Indeed, we have borrowed from Chinese many nouns of higher abstractions and names describing the superstructure of society. But the lower order abstraction, the basic way of dissecting nature, has remained more with the "pure" Japanese. It may be said, in contrast with the "Chinese" Japanese, *yamatokotoba* dissects nature with verbs.

While reading Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, I often have to stop and wonder at expressions like "non-identity of orders of abstraction", which is too much for a Japanese mind to absorb in an instant. Here is one of the difficulties in translating Korzybski into Japanese. We could put it into "Chinese" Japanese on paper, but it would not be readily understood by a Japanese reader. It should be analyzed into something like "orders of abstraction are not to be identified". It was paradoxical that Korzybski had to write about "process" in this kind of solid noun construction.

Once I was interpreting to a Japanese audience my friend Morgan Gibson's memorial speech about the late poet Kenneth Rexroth at the Kyoto American Center. Morgan poured forth, "Kenneth Rexroth lived many lives in the *avant-garde* of six decades — first in Chicago as a precocious actor, painter, and soap-box poet of revolution, etc." I was taken by surprise at the difference of linguistic processes between English and Japanese, and said, "Just a moment, please. Could you slow down a little bit ?" I took a deep breath and let him start again. Now I was quite prepared, and what I did was to put English nouns into Japanese verbs, so that the translation could flow as easily as did Morgan's English.

Morgan : Kenneth Rexroth lived many lives in the *avant-garde* of six decades — first in Chicago as a precocious actor, painter, and soap-box poet of revolution, then on the west coast as cowboy-cook, and mountain-climbing naturalist committed to the protection of the planet... he was a visionary activist, an ecstatic lyricist of love and nature, a fierce satirist against injustice ... and a philosophical playwright of tragedies. He was a famed translator from half a dozen languages of Europe and Asia³.

Yuzuru : Kenneth Rexroth had many various kinds of living in the *avant-garde* world for the last 60 years. First in Chicago he was active as a precocious actor, and he painted pictures, and was a poet crying for revolution on street corners. Then he moved to the west coast, and he cooked for cowboys, and he was a naturalist who did mountain-climbing and was committed to the protection of the planet... He was a visionary activist, a lyricist who sings of love and nature ecstatically, and wrote fierce satires against injustice, and wrote tragedies of philosophical depth. He was a famed translator, who translated from half a dozen languages of Europe and Asia.

The above is a reconstructed version to make clearer how English nouns and adjectives are shifted into Japanese verbs and adverbs. I hope the above example serves to show how natural Japanese (compared to the artificial Japanese of literal translation) is more

process-oriented and less identifying. It seems to me that this is one of the characteristics of the Japanese language which excited Emilio Aquinaldo Lanier 35 years ago. His unpublished paper "The Japanese Language — More Powerful Than the Atomic Bomb ?" was sent to me by Allen Walker Read, Professor Emeritus of Columbia University. Isn't the title prophetic of today's prosperity in Japan, which causes trade conflicts with the U.S. and other countries of the world ?

General Semantics Bulletin, 16 & 17 (1955) carries news about Professor Emilio Aquinaldo Lanier's activities in Japan. "He was professor of English at Fiske University from 1930 until 1951, with time out for his doctoral work at Harvard and intensive training in Chinese and Japanese." And he attended Korzybski's last Summer Seminar in 1949, and then came to Japan in May 1951 and taught at universities in the Nagoya area until 1956. It seems to me that Professor Lanier was so excited about non-Aristotelian possibilities of the Japanese language that he gave few concrete examples in his paper. I have to infer from his generalizations what linguistic experience led him to write such a "controversial" paper, which had to remain unpublished.

From my Japanese point of view, what he points out as advantages may turn out to be disadvantages, like a double-edged sword. Chinese characters may be a motivation for study to people like Ezra Pound, but an obstacle to many Japanese. Subtleties of honorifics fascinate many Westerners, including Lafcadio Hearn, but constitute a barrier in "democratic" communication, specially making time-binding difficult between different age-groups.

Professor Lanier points out the richness of Japanese vocabulary, which is "capable of indefinite expansion" by making new compounds from the inherited word-hoard of Chinese characters, and by "borrowing new words from foreign languages facilitated by the unique phonetic *kana* way of writing, and assimilating them". But, I am afraid, when this is carried too far, words come to mean less and less, and people talk without knowing what they are talking about.

Another way of reacting to new experience, rather unique to the Japanese language, is a tendency to us *giseigo* (onomatopoetic words) and *gitaigo*, which transcribe in sound what the experience feels like. These "words" come between the levels of "object" and "label" on the Structural Differential by which Korzybski shows the process of abstracting.

"The absolutely mandatory sensitive awareness to context", as pointed out by Lanier, makes users of the Japanese language more conscious that the word is not the thing⁴. And at the same time, the difficulty in dealing with the complexity involved is so overwhelming to many that they just keep their mouths shut.

Others deal with the problem by being "indefinite" and say, "The situation *seems* difficult", "It *looks* difficult", or "It *may become* difficult", instead of saying, "it *is* difficult", however certain they already feel about the difficulty. To be definite is considered impolite. To avoid giving the impression of being too arrogant, one leaves many of the sentences unfinished, specially the last part. In this way, even the most obstinate persons pretend, at least on the verbal level, to be open to new possibilities.

In opening a telephone conversation, the Japanese say, "*Mosi mosi, Katagiri desu ga...*" The literal English equivalent might be, "Hello. This is Katagiri, *but...*" Some linguists take this as a complete sentence, because it occurs so often and with the sentence-ending intonation. But to the Japanese mind, this is an unfinished sentence, signifying politeness, leaving room for interpretation to the other party. Being too explicit is considered underestimating the receiver's decoding ability. I do not know if any linguists

have been seriously interested in this question of unfinished statements. It may be more a cultural issue than a merely linguistic one.

Professor Lanier was indeed unique in valuing the "indefiniteness" of the Japanese sentence, and he said, "it goes far toward preventing an identification of words with things, etc." But I would also like to add that it may lead to confusion and the danger of being easily manipulated by untrustworthy people. I thank Professor Lanier for making me more aware of the advantages of the Japanese language, which I have seen mostly as disadvantages. The use of the connective *ga* (but) in an unfinished sentence may be a reflection of our awareness of "yin-yang" in the Taoist tradition, but... (I leave it to you to evaluate this matter further.)⁵

Notes

1. Presented at the New York meeting of the Institute of General Semantics, Barbizon-Plaza Hotel, April 27, 1985.
2. More absurdities in WWII Japan are described in Yuzuru Katagiri (1986) : « Between East and West — A Personal Account of Growing Out of Two-Valued Orientations », in the *Kyoto Review*, n° 19 (published by Kyoto Seika College, Japan).
3. Morgan Gibson (1965) : *Revolutionary Rexroth : Poet of the East-West Wisdom*.
4. See also Yuzuru Katagiri (1982) : "Not Relying on Words — An Aspect of the Japanese Mind", in the *Kyoto Review*, n° 14 (published by Kyoto Seika College, Japan).
5. *Ibid.*

REFERENCES

- General Semantics Bulletin*, n°s 16 & 17 (1955) : Englewood, N.J. : Institute of General Semantics.
- KORZYBSKI, Alfred (1958) : *Science and Sanity*, The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 4th ed. (Distributed by the Institute of General Semantics, Englewood, NJ).
- POUND, Ezra (1960) : *ABC of Reading*, New York : New Directions.
- RICHARDS, I.A. and Christine GIBSON (1945) : *English Through Pictures*, New York : Washington Square Press.
- WHORF, Benjamin Lee (1956) : *Language, Thought, and Reality*, Ed. John B. Carroll, Cambridge, Mass. : The M.I.T. Press.