Volume 13, Issue 1, 2024 ISSN: 2187-722X

# The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching

## Introduction

## Feature Articles



## Literature in Practice



## Conference Report



## Textbooks

*Textbooks*

# Formulating a Postgraduate Textbook on Translating Modern Japanese Literature

Richard Donovan
*Kansai University*

**Abstract**

My book *Translating Modern Japanese Literature* (Donovan, 2019) remains the first postgraduate textbook focused on Translation Studies (TS) issues related to this specific field of literature. It consists of four short literary works from the Taishō era (1912–1926), my English translations, and detailed commentary on major TS and literary issues arising. In this paper I summarise the content of the work, highlighting my pedagogical methodologies, which focus on a process-based approach to translation that is informed by literary and TS theories. I also briefly introduce the upcoming sequel to the book, which will take a slightly different approach in terms of featured literary works and methodology.

**Key words**: modern Japanese literature, Japanese–English translation, Translation Studies, literary theory

In 2018 I decided to write a textbook that would simultaneously address my pedagogical, scholarly and publishing objectives. My overall approach was to choose four short works by major Japanese authors that had not yet been published in English versions, translate them, and then write a commentary on the literary and Translation Studies (TS) issues arising from the translation process.

I used the online literary repository Aozora Bunkō (aozora.gr.jp) to access four out-of-copyright literary works never before published in English: an essay about Kyoto by Natsume Sōseki entitled "Kyō ni tsukeru yūbe" and short stories by Miyazawa Kenji ("Tani"), Yokomitsu Riichi ("Akai kimono") and Tokuda Shūhei ("Aojiroi tsuki").

From the outset, although my book was to be a TS textbook, I was determined to give equal weight to aesthetic and analytical considerations: I wanted it to focus on literature as much as Translation Studies. Thus I divided the works by theme, with "Tani" and "Akai kimono" embodying the theme of childhood, and "Kyō ni tsukeru yūbe" and "Aojiroi tsuki" exemplifying place. Then in each chapter devoted to an individual work, I focused on two specific literary and TS issues.

The discussion of these issues was an opportunity to introduce some of the literary and TS theory that underpins academic discourse, but this was always used to serve my text-grounded analyses, both of the source text (ST) or original Japanese text and the target text (TT), my English translation. I realised of course that analysing one's own translations is an inherently subjective exercise, but believe that by being as systematic as possible with my analysis I uncovered patterns in my translation strategies that could serve in the modelling of approaches for upcoming translators as well as in providing examples of the application of theory to translation process.

A further element promoting objectivity and TS insight appeared in the chapter on Sōseki's piece through a comparison with another translation. Associate Professor Sarah Frederick of Boston University kindly let me quote excerpts from her unpublished version (2015), allowing me to make direct comparisons with my own.

Having briefly overviewed the background to this coursebook, I shall now outline the parts of the book and how I believe each contributes to my pedagogical and scholarly objectives. My hope is that this description will be of interest to those instructors using either

Japanese literature, translated texts, or both in their classes. Overall I tried in this book to offer a structured yet flexible approach to the material, following the same general methodology in each chapter but leaving it up to the individual instructor as to how deeply to pursue the minutiae of a given topic with students.

## The Introduction to *Translating Modern Japanese Literature*

I began by explaining how this book fulfils the need for an extensive examination of stylistic issues in Japanese-to-English literary translation and provides an introduction to the linguistic and cultural characteristics of modern (i.e., pre-contemporary) Japanese literature. There is inherent utility in reconciling the roles of translator and academic, which often seem to be at odds. As TS expert Susan Bassnett (2002) notes regarding Translation Studies, "[t]o divorce the theory from the practice, to set the scholar against the practitioner as has happened in other disciplines, would be tragic indeed" (p. 16).

In the Introduction I acknowledged the significance to the field of such preceding works as Yōko Hasegawa's (2012) *The Routledge Course in Japanese Translation*, which at the time was the only coursebook specifically dealing with Japanese–English translation issues. (Since then, Judy Wakabayashi's (2021) *Japanese–English Translation* (Routledge) has been published.) Next I outlined the selection criteria for the book, with which those using literature in the classroom will be intimately familiar: namely "level of difficulty, length, subject matter, author, and the prevalence of literary devices" (Donovan, 2019, p. x; subsequent references to this work are mostly indicated by a page number alone).

Addressing the vexed topic of style, I used David Crystal's (1987) definition—"the (conscious or unconscious) selection of a set of linguistic features from all the possibilities in a language" (p. 66)—to allow for the insight that part of what a literary translator does when responding to the style of the ST author is as much unconsciously as consciously enacted, and that therefore by examining how one has translated one may become aware of one's stylistic tendencies and what effects they have on the TT. It is important to have such a discussion with students of literary translation early on, as it influences the entire translation process.

I ended the introduction with two suggested approaches to translating the texts. Students may undertake their own translation upon reading the introduction to each author and work that precedes the ST before comparing it with my translation and then reading my commentary on the two literary/TS issues highlighted in the commentary. Alternatively, they may spend some time reading parts of my commentary or even my translation itself to familiarise themselves with the salient issues before embarking on their own translation, as this may facilitate the translating process and make their translation choices (and hence overall TT style) more purposive.

I noted in conclusion that the methodology of the commentary proceeds in the same way in each chapter: first I analysed germane elements of the ST and then corresponding TT elements. I would often try to provide alternative translation choices, sometimes explaining why I chose one particular option over another. In this way I hoped to sharpen students' analytical skills by encouraging them to provide a rationale for their own translatorial choices, with iterations of such a process hopefully leading to better decision-making.

## Chapter 1: Miyazawa Kenji, "Tani"

Kenji (as he is conventionally known in literary circles, like Sōseki) was a writer famous for his innovative use of sound-symbolic language, also known as mimetics. Japanese is particularly rich in such expressions, though in Japanese they are usually adverbial, which tends to foreground them in a locution, while English mimetics are usually embedded in verbs and hence often less obvious. Given Kenji's association with mimetics, it was logical to focus on their manifestations in the ST and how they could be conveyed in the TT. In the commentary I began by identifying seven mimetic structures that Kenji employs in "Tani" as well as the four emphatic, marked forms that are particular to his writing (p. 25). Next I identified four major approaches I deploy in the TT: "(a) a mimetic, (b) a mimetic plus explanation, (c) an idiom, and (d) a non-mimetic paraphrase" (p. 25). This is followed by a comprehensive enumeration of the 13 variations of these four basic techniques that I identified in my translation. For each variation, "I first discuss the context of each ST mimetic …, where appropriate quoting definitions from the comprehensive *Dictionary of Iconic Expressions in Japanese* [H. Kakehi, I. Tamori, & L. Schourup, 1996]…. Next I consider how I rendered each mimetic in the TT…. I sometimes provide potential alternative translations" (pp. 25–26). I was at pains to note here—as elsewhere in the book—that "my translation choices in no way preclude other potentially valid translations" (p. 26): while I want students to find utility in emulating my approaches, they should not view my choices as the 'best' or 'only' ones in a given situation, as I wish to encourage their translatorial autonomy through enhancing their ability to justify the decisions they make.

Some readers may find excessive the detail I went into in identifying so many potential translation approaches, but as I indicated above there is no need for the student or educator to pursue every one of them. I think it is better to err on the side of more examples than fewer when modelling translation decision-making. In that vein, at the end of the chapter I provided a list of all the ST mimetics I identified, which numbers 40 entries. Since not all of them are covered in the foregoing analysis, they offer another potential avenue of study, as one of the further topics for discussion mentions.

As the end of the section on mimetics summarised, "I have employed three main techniques to address the expressive qualities of Japanese mimetics: (1) similar mimetic verbs and nouns to replace the original adverbials; (2) idioms that paraphrase the emotional or physical impression of the ST mimetic; and (3) partial or total lexical repetitions that echo the formal (structural) element of the ST mimetic" (pp. 34–35). Such a summary represents a useful overall guiding principle for students to keep in mind when they encounter mimetic expressions in a ST and consider how to render them.

In introducing the second topic, voice, I quoted the editors of Kenji's collected works regarding how the story contains the contending voices of adults and children, its adult narrator looking back on his childhood and the mysterious eponymous valley. My conclusion regarding the relevant translation stylistics was that we "should thus be able to observe diction in the story, both lexical and structural, that reflects the childish and adult perspectives and discourse, and be aware of these choices when we come to translate, so as to mark much the same shifts and maintain a corresponding tone" (p. 35).

To underline this point I brought in some literary theory with Cobley's (2001) reference to Bakhtin's idea of the heteroglossic narrative wherein he suggested a struggle between the voices of narrator and characters for dominance, which is indeed relevant to this story, as at times it seems as if the adult narrator is possessed by his childhood self in reminiscing about his time in the wilds of Iwate Prefecture at the turn of the 20th century, surely a reflection of Kenji's own upbringing.

However, having introduced some narrative theory, I then immediately grounded the discussion again by characterising the features that I identified in the ST narrative and characters' discourse, distinguishing between perceived adult and childlike lexical and structural features and providing lists of their manifestations in the ST. This was followed by a corresponding analysis of TT techniques: adult narration markers in terms of lexical and structural elements, followed by child narration markers; and then adult and child characters' speech markers respectively. A particular feature of this section was the use of tables containing three columns of text consisting of the ST Japanese; a so-called 'direct' translation (my term for a ST-orientated translation that is as close to the ST as English grammar and lexis allows); and my TT. These tables allowed the reader to see at a glance how many transformations have taken place in my rendering of a literary translation of the original. They were followed by my analyses of the texts and explanation of my rationale for the choices I have made.

I summarised that "the vast majority of the 'literariness' that the TT has gained over the direct translation comes from syntactic changes; the lexis itself, while not childish, is standard register. There are definitely parts of the TT where high-register language … is being used along with literary structures. But at the same time there are numerous cases where I combine a sophisticated structure with childish lexis" (p. 43). Again, such summaries can provide useful stylistic cues for students; equally, they can help the instructor provide related guidance. I shall continue below to provide examples from the following chapters.

**Chapter 2: Yokomitsu Riichi, "Akai kimono"**

I noted in the chapter introduction that this 1925 story is strikingly modernist in its attempts at psychological realism, as well in how, while largely from the point of view of the well-meaning but ill-fated boy Kyū, it fleetingly portrays multiple character perspectives in a so-called 'perspectivist' fashion. Such literary contextualisation is a way of cueing the student to see commonalities and mutual influences among examples of world literature, something that can be helpful as a way into literary translation itself.

The first issue, parallelism, concerns the so-called 'deviant' use of language whereby marked structures establish thematic comparisons. The first example in the ST that I cited is a quoted folksong, its patterns of repetition in the form of assonance and rhythm, which in the TT are rendered as the more formal poetic devices of rhyme and meter. Second there are prosodic repetitions, such as verbatim repetition of character utterances, and certain verbs that appear multiple times. There are also motifs such as insects and rain, and, most tellingly, as an avatar of indifferent fate, the re-appearance at the end of the story of the same lamplighter who began it, as if nothing in the world has changed despite the tragic events at the hot-spring inn where Kyū lived. I made the point that it is vital to retain as much of the repetition inherent in the ST as possible while being sensitive to the fact that English is less tolerant of verbatim repetition than Japanese is.

The second issue is figurative language, and on reflection it is evident that it was not treated with the same depth other issues were. This is partly due to my considering this section as a primer on figurative language before the in-depth treatment that occurs in Chapter 3. Instructor and students may thus find it perfunctory compared with the other sections; but on the other hand, its relative brevity may provide a moment of relief for those overwhelmed by the pedantic nature of the enumerations in Chapter 1.

After a brief introduction to metaphor as a general concept in both Japanese and English literature, I provided tables listing the examples of similes, metaphors and personification in the ST alongside how they are translated in the TT and noting any differences in approach. Drawing on Saussure's terms, my general comment on the differences between the languages was that "Japanese appears to prefer to make the connection between signifier and signified more explicit, which is why simile (with its linking particle *yō na* (*ni*) 'like, as') is used more. English's preference for metaphors has implications for literary translation: … sometimes a metaphor will replace a simile, and perhaps even a mimetic expression" (pp. 82–83). I furthermore suggested that the instances of personification in the ST manifest the deep empathy for all living things that contributes to Kyū's downfall. As with Chapter 1, the chapter concluded with a list of topics for further discussion, including a question about how to handle the different points of view that briefly appear in the story.

**Chapter 3: Natsume Sōseki, "Kyō ni tsukeru yūbe"**

As this is the most challenging piece in the book, I devoted some time to contextualising it in terms of Sōseki's literary philosophy, which was grounded in a deep understanding of literary theory and presumably tempered by his own accomplishments as a literary translator. Here is how I characterised the complex nature of the piece:

> The present essay is in equal parts descriptive of a physical, historical place, Kyoto, and of the mind of the one observing it, namely Sōseki himself. The two modes meet in a number of remarkable sentences that are at once descriptions, extended metaphors, and explorations of mental phantasms: I refer to them collectively as 'hybrid literal–figurative passages'. As Sōseki and his hosts rush ever further north across the city, Sōseki and his thoughts rush onwards across the psychological terrain of memory and conjecture, a palimpsest of his summer visit many years before with his friend Shiki, of his current early-spring visit without him, and of all the cultural and literary associations of Kyoto he has accrued over a lifetime. (p. 92)

I paraphrased Professor Frederick's explanation of how Sōseki "uses physical objects both as representations of received notions of a place—the *zenzai* soup that he equates with Kyoto itself—and conduits into the abstract yet inextricably personal realm of his thoughts and feelings" (p. 93). As I noted in conclusion, the "peculiar challenge of the translator … is to do justice to these streams of consciousness that alternate … between the concrete and the imagined, cultural commonality and the excruciatingly personal" (p. 93).

It was a real challenge to decide how to present examples of such hybrid passages. In the end I decided to provide a sample of representative passages in order of appearance, "characterising their main feature(s) in the sub-heading, juxtaposing my and Professor Frederick's translations, and occasionally relating Frederick's comments on the translation and translating process" (p. 110). This was followed by overall conclusions about how we handled such hybrid devices.

Of the 12 passages I singled out for analysis, I spent quite a lot of time on the first, which consists of the opening two sentences of the ST and is fundamental to establishing Sōseki's stylistic *modus operandi* in this piece. First I provided a table that presents the ST and two TTs as three horizontal bands of text, allowing for relatively easy comparison. Next I listed the six figurative elements present in the ST and characterised them. I suggested that the passage not only sets the scene in concrete terms, it also establishes its tone through zoomorphism, personification and even perhaps pathetic fallacy ("the attribution of human-like emotions or intentions to an inanimate object" (p. 113), in this case the hulking train that 'shakes Sōseki off' in Kyoto before continuing on its way. Then I compared the TTs both with the ST and with each other. I invoked Berman's (1985/2000) concept of 'ennoblement' in translation, wherein attempts to 'improve' upon the ST result in 'deformation' of the ST: "Both of us … have enhanced the 'literariness' by increasing sonic parallelism" (p. 115): we both add alliteration, while I also add consonance and Frederick assonance, where they are absent in the ST. The exercise of questioning exactly which expressions were figurative and which literal raised interesting points about the labile nature of language in general.

The second issue of the chapter, Culturally Specific Items or CSIs, introduced a perennial TS concern: how to render culturally bound elements when they have no direct equivalent in the target language. I combined this issue with my own classification of the TT strategies that can be employed to deal with CSIs. In my PhD thesis (Donovan, 2012) I boiled such strategies down to four key terms—retention, modification, addition and omission—characterising such strategies as either 'foreignising' (retaining aspects of the 'foreign' language/culture in the target text) or 'domesticating' (converting ST elements into more 'palatable' or familiar elements in the TT).

An explanation of the strategies was followed by a large table listing all the CSIs I located in the ST (which totalled 72 items), a direct translation, the TT translations and a characterisation of the translation strategies employed in each translation. An analysis of representative examples of these CSIs followed. I finished the section with a summative analysis of TT strategies, contrasting Frederick's and my approaches.

Indeed, in comparing and contrasting two translations in this chapter, I modelled the salutary activity of peer production comparison that I often use in my own courses.

**Chapter 4: Tokuda Shūsei, "Aojiroi tsuki"**

This story of a narrator bemused by intergenerational differences and the rapid modernisation in Kantō that perhaps embodied them makes it read as the most 'modern' piece in some ways, something reflected in its style: "the story's multiple thematic strands, temporal jumps, geographical references and tonal shifts are deliberately confusing" (p. 164). I suggested that the translator should thus work to retain such a sense of confusion—yet certain differences in Japanese and English literary conventions may confuse excessively, highlighting the issue of textual cohesion. The second issue, double negatives, is another manifestation of the evasive and jumbled mental state of the narrator.

In introducing textual cohesion, I began with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal research, which distinguished lexical and grammatical cohesive devices, where lexical cohesion is enabled through reiteration and collocation, while grammatical cohesion consists of the elements reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. I provided my own examples of lexical and grammatical cohesion in English and Japanese and then demonstrated how cohesive devices work across two paragraphs of the ST and the corresponding three paragraphs in the TT, showing differences in the two languages' approaches. For example, "I was surprised how closely the configuration of lexical elements fit the expectation of elegant variation in English writing [whereby verbatim repetition is often avoided]: there is not one significant verbatim repetition among the lexical cohesive elements" (p. 209).

I provided 14 additional comparisons of ST/TT paragraphs. In terms of structural cohesion, I demonstrated that, as Hinds (1987) suggested, a 'reader-responsibility' language like English has stronger expectations of temporal, spatial and logical consistency than Japanese does, necessitating reordering of information and the addition of linking utterances so as to make the narrative flow more acceptable to English readers.

The final issue, double negatives, particularly concerns the rhetorical device of litotes, or understatement in a negative form, such as *sō iu kyōmi wa nai koto wa nai* "it wasn't as if I had no interest in these things" (p. 228). I noted that in this story, "it appears Tokuda is using double negatives to add to the portrait of a man in a confused state: he finds it difficult to make a definitive statement about anything" (p. 227). I compared ST and TT features across nine example passages, ultimately concluding that I used eight different techniques to render the effects and meanings of the double-negative constructions in English, "suggesting that I am instinctively avoiding using the straight grammatically negative structures of the ST and instead making frequent use of semantic negative forms and expressions of limited degree to convey the mixed feelings in the ST" (p. 233).

I ended the book with brief Concluding Remarks, challenging student translators to use my model translations and commentary to enlarge their repertory of techniques in translating Japanese literature.

I would like to conclude my remarks here with a comment on how my follow-up coursebook project differs from the original. The overall approach remains much the same: I have again chosen four short out-of-copyright works to translate and shall then discuss two literary and/or TS issues in relation to each. However, all the authors this time are female, ranging in age from mid-teens to adult, and some pieces were written in the mid-1940s, depicting the severe environment of Japan at the time. I also introduce a more inclusive method of analysis, beginning discussion of each ST with a report on the sociolinguistic and literary features of the text before narrowing the analysis down to two highlighted issues. The pedagogical purpose of this is to encourage students to view each text as something that can be analysed as a literary entity in its own right, with translation being one possible response to that entity.

I have also widened the range of text types presented, this time featuring a young teenager's diary, an older teenager's essays, and two short stories. Furthermore, three out of the four works are presented in their original archaic orthography, with a preceding primer on how to read them. My hope is that the slight changes in approach mean that the new book will complement the original, offering a fresh entry point into the translation of modern Japanese literature.

**Author Biography**

*Richard Donovan* is an Associate Professor at Kansai University, Japan, teaching literary translation studies, English literature, and comparative literature. In 2021 he won the Grand Prize in the 5th JLPP International Translation Competition. This research was financially supported by the Kansai University Fund for Domestic and Overseas Research, 2022.
<rdonovan@kansai-u.ac.jp>

**References**

Aozora Bunkō. Online Japanese-literature repository at aozora.gr.jp.

Berman, A. (1985/2000). Translation and the trials of the foreign (L. Venuti, Trans.). In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The translation studies reader* (pp. 285–97). Routledge.

Bassnett, S. 2002. *Translation studies*. Routledge.

Bourdaghs, M., Ueda, A., & Murphy, J. (2010). Natsume Sōseki and the ten-year project. (Introduction.) In Natsume, S., *Theory of literature and other critical writings* (pp. 1–35). Columbia University Press.

Cobley, P. (2001). *Narrative*. Routledge.

Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge University Press.

Donovan, R. (2012). *Dances with words: Issues in the translation of Japanese literature into English*. Unpublished manuscript. Victoria University of Wellington.

Donovan, R. (2019). *Translating modern Japanese literature*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Frederick, S. (2015). Arriving in Kyoto one evening. Unpublished manuscript. Boston University. http://sites.bu.edu/sarahfrederick/natsume-soseki-research.

Halladay, M., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. Longman.

Hinds, J. (1987). Reader versus writer responsibility: A new typology. In *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text*, eds. U. Conner & R. B. Kaplan (pp. 141–152). Adison-Wesley.

Kakehi, H., Tamori, I., & Schourup, L. (1996). *Dictionary of iconic expressions in Japanese*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Miyazawa, K. (1979). *Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* (vol. 9), eds. S. Miyazawa, Y. Irisawa, & T. Amazawa. Chikuma Shobō.

Venuti, L. (2008). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation* (2nd edition). Routledge.