

Bows and Translator Intervention in the Japanese Version of *A Pale View of Hills*

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In a 1987 interview, Kazuo Ishiguro said that he had dreaded what Japanese people would feel about his early novels, which are set in Japan: probably “this is ridiculous: this is a world we know and he’s misrepresenting it” (Sexton 32). No doubt his translators figured in this anxiety. Not only would they be among his first Japanese readers, but they would also be in a position to do something about any “misrepresentations.” In the case of *A Pale View of Hills* (1982, henceforth *PVH*) the translator would have to deal with the realist effect Ishiguro sought in his “imaginary world” (Sexton 32) of Nagasaki in the early 1950s.

Ishiguro might have been reassured to know the unmitigated enthusiasm his first translator, Onodera Takeshi (小野寺健 1931–2018), reported upon reading *PVH*. The translator describes it as the “rare experience of being caught up in the strange magic of a work that would not let me stop to rest once I started translating” (“Yakusha atogaki” [1984] 275).¹ He might have worried anew, however, to know that the entire novel’s translation was completed in just twenty days, meaning that the translator had to make decisions quickly and, at least initially, with little time for revisions.² Working in 1984, Onodera was also unaware of the level of sustained attention that would come to be directed to Ishiguro’s work over the next decades as his novels appealed to readers and critics the world over and at times caused sensations. A professor of literature, Onodera was also an experienced literary translator of novelists such as Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Bernard Malamud, and V. S. Naipaul, among numerous others, but he dealt here with a touchy translation

¹ Translations are mine except for extracts from Onodera’s translation of *PVH*.

² Onodera, a full-time literature professor at Yokohama City University, completed this translation between 12 August and 7 September, which corresponds to the summer break (“Yakusha atogaki” [1984] 275). He revised his translation for the paperback reprint ten years later in 1994, and again for a transition to a new publisher in 2001. Initially titled *女たちの遠い夏* [The women’s distant summer], in 2001 the title was brought closer to the English: *遠い山なみの光* [The distant hills’ light]. Here, I am using the first version he produced in 1984.

situation. The source text showed how the target culture—people’s behavior, speech, everyday items such as clothing and utensils—was imagined from an English perspective for an outsider audience. Its import “back” to the Japanese language would diminish the exotic effect and call accuracy into question.

In *PVH*, Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman living in England, reminisces about her life as a young married woman in Nagasaki, remembering the brief friendship she formed with an unconventional woman named Sachiko and the visit of her father-in-law, called Ogata-San, over the course of one summer. Although Ishiguro has said that in *PVH* he did not aim to show a “real” Japan he didn’t know, he does employ the realist mode to put together a convincing picture of a place called “Japan” for English-language readers. The result can seem exaggerated. Suter calls it “Japan for Beginners... the representation of a Japan for tourists made of tatami, chopsticks, people bowing—in short, of all the elements that a reader expects to find in a text written by an author named Kazuo Ishiguro” (Suter, ch. 2). Sánchez-Arce notes the “pattern of simulation and mock-realism in Ishiguro’s narrators who seem to be translated in the sense that they mimic social roles and the language that goes with them” (148). Such a portrayal of language and behavior as “translated” for English readers puts into relief the difficulty for a translator of how to deal with culture-specific elements and behaviors in a “translational ‘re-import’” (Shibata 47). Aware of Ishiguro’s limited first-hand knowledge of Japanese culture (“Yakusha atogaki” [1984] 276), Onodera had to decide how to represent Ishiguro’s writing accurately, whether a (mock-)realist mode could be established, and how his own authority as the translator should be deployed to this end—that is, what kinds of interventions he would practice.

In looking at Onodera’s translation, I am interested in how agency, “the ability to exert power in an intentional way” (Buzelin, para. 1), can figure as textual decisions within the constraints of accurate translation. While problem-solving and decision-making are integral to the translation process, “interventions” can be understood as specific instances where the translator will “interpret and manipulate rather than operate a purely linguistic transfer” (Katan 79). Such interventions are assumed to be intentional and thus to show agency. Culture-specific elements are one point of tension where we can seek them.

PVH offers plenty of opportunities for the examination of culture-specific elements in translation. The translator notes himself the salient problem of the translation of names (“Yakusha atogaki” [1984] 278; “Yakusha atogaki” [2001] 267–268). Other problems include

appellations and honorific suffixes such as “San”, realia such as lanterns, kimonos, and tatamis, borrowed words such as “Ame-kos” and “kujibiki,” various behaviors, and an exoticized orality in how people speak in the scenes set in Japan.³ Here I focus on just one culture-specific behavior: bowing. The word “bow” occurs throughout the novel and has been noted by Saitō as problematic: cropping up whenever characters “need to appear polite”, its use is “immoderate” and “strange” compared with actual Japanese custom, which is to bow primarily for greeting (176). It is noteworthy that Saitō, referring to the English text, interprets Ishiguro’s bows with the word お辞儀 *ojigi*. Whereas the English word “bow” suggests formality on a level with *ojigi*, Onodera’s translation favors other terms that downplay formality, as we will see. The word “bow” in *PVH* is indeed frequent, and this density contributes to the exoticizing effect noted above. A bow in the novel depicts a character’s communicative intent that readers must infer from the scene’s description and dialogue.

In the following pages I compare how bowing is expressed in *PVH* and in Onodera’s translation. To focus on agency, I examine the five scenes in the novel where the translator intervened beyond straightforward linguistic transfer. Two complementary aspects matter: the role each bow plays in the narrative interaction, and how the translator deals with it in successive instances.

Bows (and nods) in the novel

The word “bow” as noun and verb occurs thirty-nine times in *PVH*. Saitō’s remarks above notwithstanding, I note that its main use is for greeting and leave-taking (20 instances), but that characters also bow when acknowledging a remark (6), thanking someone (6), apologizing (3), and acquiescing to a request (4). A few of the bows are qualified (“small” (6), “elegant” (2), “dramatic,” “low,” “gracefully,” “appreciatively,” “slightly,” “for several moments,” “an endless succession of”), but most are given no qualification (24). Narrator Etsuko reads expression into the bows of her friends: three of Sachiko’s five bows are either “elegant” or done “gracefully,” and seven of Ogata-San’s ten bows are “small,” “dramatic,” or made “appreciatively.” Of her own fourteen bows she qualifies three as restrained (“small,” “slightly”). The repeated bowing of her husband’s drunken colleagues is associated with silliness (“grinning and bowing,” “bow and giggle”), that of the intellectual Shigeru Matsuda

³ In Ishiguro’s words, the way the narrator reproduces Japanese dialogue “ha[d] to have a certain foreignness about it” (Mason 13).

with an upstanding attitude (“bowed and held out his hand,” “picked up his briefcase and bowed”). The bows serve as occasions for straightforward characterization even as they evoke a stereotypical Japaneseness.

Japanese translation equivalents for “bow”

The word “bow” in *PVH* stands en bloc for a cultural practice that has a wider range in Japanese than in English. The *Encyclopedia of Japan* describes the basic characteristics of Japanese bowing, giving お辞儀 *ojigi* as the equivalent: “It accompanies and reinforces (or sometimes replaces) spoken expressions of greeting, thanks, apology, and request, among others. A formal bow is properly made by inclining the body at an angle of about 30 degrees . . . In less formal circumstances one inclines the body less” (“Bowling”). This bow “by inclining the body” is probably what Ishiguro and his English readers would agree is going on in *PVH* conversations. It represents a stereotypically Japanese interaction and does not feature in the novel’s sections set in England.

To translate “bow,” the Japanese language offers several options beyond the aforementioned *ojigi*. Onodera privileges variations on the phrase 頭をさげる *atama wo sageru* [lower the head], which he uses in thirty instances. He also uses *ojigi* three times and 会釈をする *eshaku wo suru* twice, but it is likely that *atama wo sageru* worked for him as the most generic phrase: taken verbatim it describes a bodily movement, while *ojigi* and *eshaku* have more complex etymologies. Still, its common usage is not to describe a neutral movement, but rather to convey a specific intent, such as apology.⁴

Finally, the gesture of nodding has similarities with bowing. The visual distinction between a bow and a nod may be blurry: lowering the head (rather than the upper body) can be read as an informal bow. Some expressive function also overlaps. While not as frequent as bows, nods also occur as elements of conversations in *PVH* (25 instances). Most instances suggest intents such as agreement, approval, understanding, decision, or a sort of reminiscence (a character “nodding to himself”). Onodera renders all the nods in the novel with their translation equivalent, 頷く/うなづく *unazuku*, suggesting that this lexeme does not trouble him.

⁴ For example, the dictionary definition includes intents: “Lower the head to express a feeling of respect or gratitude. Do *ojigi*. . . . Submit to someone. Surrender. . . . Admit a wrong and ask forgiveness. Apologize. . . .” (“頭をさげる [*atama wo sageru*],” def. 1, 2 and 3)

Translator interventions

In just seven of the thirty-nine bows, Onodera's translation intervenes in one of three ways: he adds his own qualifier, he renders a bow as a nod (5 instances), and he renders an unspecified gesture as a bow. There is no major change to the narrative or characterization resulting from Onodera's choices. They can be justified as accurate translations. Rather than their accuracy, I want to interrogate how the translator employed agency in these cases.

Table 1. Translator interventions for bows

Scene (chapter)	Source text	Target text	Characters (relationship)	Function
1 (1)	bowed	かるく頭をさげて [bowed lightly]	Sachiko to Etsuko (acquaintances)	Leave-taking
	bowed	頷いた [nodded]		Acquiescing to a request
2 (1)	bowed	頷いた [nodded]	Etsuko to Sachiko (acquaintances)	Acquiescing to a request
	bowed	頷いた [nodded]		Acknowledging a remark
3 (2)	gestured towards them	軽く会釈をする [made a slight bow]	Mrs Fujiwara to customers (restaurant owner to customers)	Greeting
4 (3)	gave a bow	頷いた [nodded]	Etsuko to Sachiko (friends)	Acknowledging a remark
5 (5)	bowed	うなずいて [nodded]	Etsuko to Sachiko (friends)	Acquiescing to a request

The translator intervenes in the bows of five scenes from Chapters 1 to 5. There are eleven chapters, so this represents approximately the first half of the novel. As Table 1 shows, it is most often the narrator, Etsuko, whose gestures the translator manipulates. Her friend Sachiko is the very first person to bow in the novel, but Sachiko's subsequent bows are few, and as we will see they are punctuated with the qualifiers "elegant" and "gracefully" so as to make them unambiguously formal gestures, which the translator does not modify. Mrs Fujiwara, a minor character, gestures in a commercial role.

Scene 1

Onodera's first intervention is in the novel's first bow, as Sachiko takes leave of Etsuko near a tram stop. The two are relative strangers at this point in the narrative, and they have just had a tense interaction.

A Pale View of Hills (PVH): For a moment, [Sachiko] continued to look at me with her amused expression. Then she said: "How kind you are. Now please excuse me. I must get into town." She bowed, then turned towards the path that led up towards the tram stop. (15)

Onna-tachi no tōi natsu [The women's distant summer] (OTN): 彼女はまだおかしそうな顔でちょっとわたしを見ていたが、やがて「ありがとうございます。じゃ、失礼するわね。町までいなくなっちゃならないんで」と言うと、かるく頭をさげて停留所のほうへ行く道を歩きだした。[She looked at me a little longer with an amused face, but finally said, "Thank you very much. Well, please excuse me. I must get to town," bowed slightly and started walking down the path towards the stop.] (14)

Onodera translates this first bow with *atama wo sage*te, which will be his standard phrase for bowing throughout the novel. However, he adds the qualifier *karuku* (slightly). Two points can be observed about this intervention. First, the translator probably considers the narrative context: in the exchange that precedes the bow, Sachiko's manner is distinctly dismissive and maybe even ironic. Specifying a "slight" quality to what is considered a respectful way to take leave blends with that aspect of the interaction. Onodera gives a formalized interpretation to another part of the exchange ("How kind you are" as "*Arigatō gozaimashita* [Thank you very much]"), sustaining the impression. Second, this is the first instance of bowing in the novel. At the outset, the translator confronts the source text use of the device with discomfort or skepticism by adding a descriptor.

Scene 2

The second scene is also in Chapter 1. At tea in her home, Sachiko asks Etsuko for a favor. Etsuko makes three bows during their conversation which I take to signal twice acquiescing, and once acknowledging a remark made by Sachiko.

PVH: “Etsuko, may I ask a favour of you?”

I bowed. “I have some savings of my own,” I said, almost in a whisper. “I’d be pleased to be of some assistance.” (20)

OTN: 「お願いしてもいいかしら」

わたしは頷いた。「わたしの貯金もすこしはあるし」まるでひそひそ話だった。「お役に立てれば嬉しいわ」 [“May I ask a favour?” / I nodded. “I also have some savings of my own.” The words were almost a whisper. “I would be happy to be of use.”] (22)

PVH: “You can rest assured on that.”

I bowed again. “I’ll enquire when I next see her.” (21)

OTN: 「その点は大丈夫」

わたしはもう一度頷いた。「このつき奥さんに会ったら、訊いてみるわ」 [“That point is all right.” / I nodded once more. “The next time I meet her, I’ll ask.”] (23)

PVH: “Of course, I don’t mind a little discomfort. But about some things, I’m still rather discerning.”

I bowed, saying nothing. (21)

OTN: 「むろん、多少の貧乏は平気よ。でも、物によっては今でもすこしうるさいの」

わたしは黙って頷いた。 [“Of course, I don’t mind a little poverty. But about some things I am still particular.” / I stayed silent and nodded.] (24)

Etsuko’s repeated bows in this scene are offered as a natural part of the interaction. She acquiesces to requests and acknowledges or defers to Sachiko’s remark. These are not common uses of bowing in Japanese conversation: as Saitō notes, “it might be normal to nod to accommodate a request, but certainly not to bow” (176). Thus, choosing to translate these three bows as nods, the translator shows himself being attentive to how the gesture participates in the narrative. He applies his translation solution when Etsuko’s gesture of assent is explicitly repeated (“again”) in the scene. While the first two bows are accompanied by speech, the third is different in that it carries the full weight of a reply (“I bowed, saying nothing”). This response is ambiguous; it is not clear what if anything Etsuko intends to convey. Sachiko appears to interpret it as expressing doubt or suspicion, as otherwise unprompted, she then confesses to having stolen a tea set (Ishiguro 21). The translator’s choice of a nod, a gesture of assent, reduces this ambiguity. Thus, while the translator’s choice of a nod keeps the continuity with the previous two instances, it also makes the

friction in the interaction less potent.

Scene 3

In the third scene, Sachiko, who is working at Mrs Fujiwara's noodle shop, has just greeted Etsuko's visit with "an elegant bow" (26). Mrs Fujiwara spots incoming customers, acknowledges their presence with a gesture, and goes to greet them.

PVH: Mrs Fujiwara gestured towards [the customers] . . .

She appeared to know them, for as she walked across the forecourt, she gave them a familiar greeting. (26-27)

OTN: 藤原さんは軽く会釈して . . .

おなじみらしく、そばへ行って親しげに挨拶している。

[Fujiwara-san made a slight *eshaku*. . . / It seems they are known to her, and when she goes to their side she greets them familiarly.] (31)

In this scene, Mrs Fujiwara's gesture in English becomes a "slight *eshaku*" in Japanese. By using the language of bowing Onodera refines the unspecified gesture of the source text. The word *eshaku* has a range of meanings from an intent of sympathy or greeting to a physical bow at various levels.⁵ Qualified here as *karuku* (slight), performed by a restaurant owner to customers, *eshaku* is readily understood as a gesture of the head and neck acknowledging the customers' presence, rather than a bow from the waist. The English text makes it clear that the "gesture" is a preliminary to the "familiar greeting" that comes after. Whereas the English "gestured" might be visualized as a movement of the hands or the head, Onodera takes charge of the visual and narrows it to a movement of the head. This is the only instance in the translation where Onodera uses a bowing signifier in a place where the source text had none. In addition, the scene contrasts the two greetings: Sachiko's "elegant bow" to Etsuko (just before the extract above), and Mrs Fujiwara's familiar manner with the customers. Onodera's choice to use a bowing signifier as one of the greetings accentuates this contrast.

⁵ "Sympathy. A sympathetic face. Charm . . . Nod smilingly. Lower the neck slightly in a bow. Greeting. *Ojigi*. . ." (会釈 [*eshaku*], def. 4 and 5)

Scene 4

The fourth scene contains just one bow, but I quote it at length to show its place in an exchange.

PVH: Perhaps Sachiko had caught something in my tone; she looked up and stared at me, and when she spoke again, her voice had become more tense.

“I didn’t need to leave Tokyo, Etsuko . . .”

I gave a bow. Sachiko looked at me for a moment, then turned and gazed out through the open partitions, out into the darkness.

“But you’ve left your uncle now,” I said. “And now you’re about to leave Japan.”

Sachiko glared at me angrily. “Why do you speak to me like this, Etsuko?” (45)

OTN: 佐知子はわたしの口調に何かを嗅ぎつけたのかもしれない。顔を上げてわたしを見た彼女は、また口をひらいたときには、さらに切口上になっていた。

「東京を離れる必要なんかなかったのよ。 . . .」

わたしは頷いた。佐知子はちらっとわたしを見ると、ふりむいて、襖の向うの暗闇をのぞきこんだ。

「でも、今では伯父さまのところも出て、こんどは日本をお出になるわけね」

佐知子は憤然とわたしをにらんだ。「どうして、そんな言い方をするの、悦子さん」

[Sachiko may have sensed something in my tone. She raised her face and looked at me, and when she opened her mouth again she spoke more stiffly. / “There was no need to leave Tokyo . . .” / I nodded. Sachiko looked at me briefly then turned to gaze into the darkness beyond the *fusuma*. / “But now you’ve left your uncle too, and the fact is next you’re leaving Japan.” / Sachiko glared at me in a rage. “Why do you speak like that, Etsuko-san?”] (61)

In English, Etsuko’s bow replaces a reply, and there is no accompanying description to clarify its intent (as with the third bow in the second scene). The scene emphasizes voice (“my tone,” “her voice,” “why do you speak to me like this?”) in an escalating disagreement between the characters. The silent bow seems to signal acceptance of an assertion; it halts the escalation momentarily until words restart it. Etsuko’s bow and her ensuing words are at odds, making a clash in the exchange. In the translation, the nod performs this function of temporary, deceitful retreat in a way that the language of bowing might hinder. Bowing in Japanese carries a semantic load of respect and sincerity that is difficult to reconcile with

the mood of this scene. This choice again suggests Onodera considered how the interaction unfolds in the scene.

Scene 5

The fifth scene mirrors an earlier one between Etsuko and Sachiko. In the second scene, Etsuko thought she was being asked for money, but Sachiko instead requested an introduction. This time, Etsuko misunderstands Sachiko in reverse: it is indeed money she wants.

PVH: “Yes, I see,” I said, with a small bow. “If you wish, I could certainly talk to Mrs Fujiwara . . .”

“No, no, Etsuko”—Sachiko gave a laugh—“ . . . I’ll need a little money. And I was just remembering, Etsuko, how you once offered to assist me in that respect.”

She was looking at me with a kindly smile. I looked back at her for a few moments.

Then I bowed and said:

“I have some savings of my own. Not a great deal, but I’d be glad to do what I can.”

Sachiko bowed gracefully . . . (70)

OTN: 「そうよね」わたしはちょっと頭をさげた。「よければ藤原さんに話してあげるわ . . .」

「ちがうのよ、悦子さん」——佐知子は笑った——「 . . . すこしお金があるわ。それで思い出したんだけど、以前融通してくださるっておっしゃったでしょう」

彼女は微笑してわたしを見ている。わずかな間だったが、わたしはその顔をじっと見てから、うなずいて言った。

「わたしの貯金が多少はあるわ。たくさんはないけど、できるだけことはさせていただくわ」

佐知子は上品に頭をさげる . . .

[“I see.” I bowed a little. “If you like I’ll talk to Fujiwara-san for you. . . .” / “Not that, Etsuko-san”—Sachiko laughed—“ . . . I need a little money. And I remembered, didn’t you kindly say you would make me a loan before.” / She is looking at me with a smile. It was just a short moment, but I watched that face steadily, then I nodded and said: / “I have a few savings. It is not a lot, but let me do what I can.” / Sachiko bowed elegantly.] (100-101)

The flow of the interaction echoes that of the second scene, but the description of Etsuko’s

bows has changed: one is qualified (“with a small bow”) and the second does not indicate repetition with “again” (“Then I bowed and said”). Onodera treats the bows differently than in the prior scene, where he rendered both as nods. This time, the first stays a small bow (*chotto atama o sageta*) while the second becomes a nod (*unazuite*). Sachiko’s ensuing elegant bow is translated straightforwardly with its qualifier (*jōhin ni atama wo sageru*).

Onodera seems caught in a bind. The choice of *unazuku* he made in the earlier scene could be reused, asserting the accuracy of an interpretation made through his translatorial agency, and maintaining the mirroring effect probably intended. But two of the source text bows are qualified, implying precise authorial intentions. He renders these as bows (*atama wo sageta/sageru*) and makes only the unqualified instance into a nod of acceptance. Narratively, the request the translator has Etsuko nod to is a more difficult one than any previous requests, perceived or real, in either scene, as Sachiko’s situation has changed. Etsuko is shown pausing to consider before accepting, and the translator expands the description of the pause considerably in the translation, breaking a prepositional phrase into a separate clause and adding lexemes (*sono kao* [that face], *jitto* [steadily]). But instead of starting a new sentence after the pause, as Ishiguro does to dramatic effect (“I looked back at her for a few moments. Then I bowed . . .”), the translator integrates the nod in the sentence, muting its impact.⁶

This scene is the final instance of the translatorial intervention examined here—the nod replacing an English “bow.” From the remainder of Chapter 5 to the end of the novel in Chapter 11, all bows are rendered as *atama wo sageru* (15 instances) or *ojigi wo suru* (3).

Discussion

Ishiguro’s insistent use of the bow acclimates readers to it as they progress through the novel. We come to regard it as an expressive device within the narrative world of *PVH*, and to lean on adjacent descriptions to grasp the tenor of interactions. The translator as reader is perhaps no less subject to this acclimating effect. As we saw above, Onodera starts by questioning the nuances of the bows, and initially experiments with nods as a potential equivalent to help them make sense in the narrative. He continues to search through the five scenes examined here, then stops midway through the novel and settles on

⁶ Another possible but hard to account for intervention is in the orthography. In every other instance Onodera used the kanji character 頷 to write the “nod” root, but here he makes a single switch to the hiragana うなず. There is no semantic difference, but the change may be another signal of the translator’s discomfort with continuing to resist the source text language of bows. In the second revision issued in 2001, the hiragana orthography is the only one used throughout the novel, so this (possible) mark of agency disappears.

straightforward renderings.

This reading of Onodera's interventions sees a linear progression in his decision-making during the twenty-day period he says he rushed through his translation. It may be countered that subsequent editing would have blurred any such traces. However, it is notable that the quirks noted in the five scenes above survived two subsequent revisions (1994 and 2001), which keep the nods as well as the bows as they are shown here.

Reading decision-making into a translator's choices is a limited way to investigate agency: not only are the translator's intentions uncertain, but examining translation choices offers no guarantee of revealing a cohesive strategy. If translatorial agency is seen in interventions, it could be said that Onodera gave up some agency with respect to bows midway through his translation process. The interventions for bows, which are few even in the first part of the novel examined above, disappear entirely in the remainder of the novel, which contains almost as many bows as in the first part. Bows become *atama wo sageru* and *ojigi* as a matter of fact, and their qualifiers conform exactly to the source text. For example, a scene in chapter 10 in which Etsuko meets Sachiko's elderly cousin features six bows, and Onodera translates them all directly. After the hesitation seen in the fifth scene examined above, this suggests something became settled in the translator's approach.

What constraints acted on the translator is impossible to say for certain, although archival research and interviews with Onodera's editors could yield clues. One was probably a looming deadline and consequent forgoing of delicate narrative analysis. Another might be a gradual acclimation to the imaginary Japan created by Ishiguro in tension with the realist mode, much like how Ishiguro requires his English readers to acclimate to his characters' language of bows. Simeoni describes this "common experience in translating . . . the feeling of gradual easing as the task progresses . . . The first pages are always the most hesitant, those where predominant options must be defined . . ." (Simeoni 28). This encounter with resistant structures (in this case realist representations that contradict the agent's own sense of realism) exert "pressure to comply with external — i.e. not (yet?) internalized norms" (27–28). Possibly in examining bows in this translation, we witness the translator grappling with such an internalization.

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