

Creative Self-Translation in Life Writing Classes: Living in Japanese, writing in English

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Abstract

Translation as a mode of writing is an important means of discovering how a life might be re-imagined. In the process of assessing a life in Japanese and then writing in English, the student writer/translator may find words for what could not be expressed in Japanese. The writing introduced in this paper, with students' comments, is participatory writing, in which students are circulating their thoughts in the classroom and then on social media. It slows the pace of living and provides an opportunity to slow down the process of thinking, promoting creativity and an awareness of possibility. Through a cycle of writing, sharing, discussing and rewriting, students learn about the importance of process, and the way that it shapes the class community, understanding change in terms of relationships, not only between Japanese and English or understanding the past and present in one's own life, but about the effect of writing and sharing lives.

Introduction

There is a long history of border management to maintain clear distinctions between creative writing and translation, but in life writing classes, where Japanese students write about their lives in English, the shifts in consciousness that take place in both translation and in becoming a character – while writing the story of your own life – work in tandem to reposition the personal past and prefigure the future.

Translation as a mode of writing is an important means of discovering how a life might be re-imagined. Self-translation, as I propose to use the term in this paper, is a form of writing in which you are able to focus on the writing as the process of revising your relationship with aspects of your life. In that process of assessing a life in Japanese and then writing in English, the student writer/translator may find words for what could not be expressed in Japanese. With this awareness gained through translation, the student finds that they can do things with language and their lives that had not seemed possible. This version of self-translation that I consider in this paper on writing Japanese lives in English is not done in isolation; it is a participatory writing: students are not writing private diaries but circulating their thoughts in the classroom and then on social media.

The ease and speed of circulation, and the consciousness of framing lives for others to view is another form of translation that is considered in this paper. Translation is imbricated within and among media, but because it is a deep and careful reading, it remains a way to slow the pace of living and provide an opportunity to slow down the process of thinking. Before sharing and circulating, the writer needs a chance to think about who s/he is, what s/he wants to say and why. Slowing down enough to take stock of the way meaning is made in a language, or in a life, is a fundamental step towards a closer scrutiny of the cultural assumptions rehearsed in life and repeated in writing about it. Translation interrupts that repetition and promotes instead creativity and an awareness of possibility.

Imagine: a life translated...

Kimie Takahashi points out in *Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move* (2013), that “[f]or many Japanese women, the English language has never been just another school subject. For them, English is the tool of identity transformation and the means of obtaining what they passionately desire.”¹ Takahashi identifies “mobility, the West and its masculinity” as the prime motivators for learning English, but I think that students who take time to sit down and write about their lives have at least slightly different motivations. Among the students in my life writing class, autonomy seems to be the most important reason for learning English and writing about their lives. They do want to travel and meet people, but they are also interested in examining their own lives and shaping their own futures in more than one language, and possibly more than two. My students are younger (18 to 21), and most are still living at home. They are not so much seeking romantic entanglement in another life and language as they are trying to ease themselves out of the web of familial relations that seem restrictive. Here are two examples from second-year students’ writing:

But since I am the youngest, everybody in the family seems to think that I am still a child. My father carries in his pass case a picture of me when I was a baby. My brother still can’t believe that I can ride a bicycle and my mother and sister can’t believe that I am already a university student. Although I am nineteen years old now, they think I am still a child.

I am the youngest in the family. When I was a child I would call my brother Oni or Yosuke, and this would make my mother and grandmother angry. They would always say, “You must call him Onichan. You mustn’t call him Yosuke, and you should show him respect.” I couldn’t understand, because I felt it was unfair for us to be treated like this because of a difference of only one year. I felt

¹ Takahashi, Kimie. (2013). *Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move*. Back cover.

we were like twins, and I didn't want to be treated like *onichan* and *imoto*. I wanted to be treated equally. Nowadays, in order not to make my mother and grandmother angry, I call my brother Yosukekun with a little bit of respect.

Although I have not found Western masculinity to be one of the topics that my students explicitly write about, gender is a frequent concern. Students write about the different things that are expected of boys and girls in Japanese society and the inconsistency in the ways they feel about these expectations themselves and how they construct their expectations toward boys. For example, consider the consciousness of gender roles apparent in this excerpt from a 20-year-old woman's life writing:

I resisted *onnarashisa*. I hated the word, *joshiryoku*. What was *joshiryoku*? Was it the ability for example, when boys and girls had a meal together, for the girl to be able to share the dishes among people? Was it the ability for girls to be able to make sweets? Was it the ability to be conscious of beauty? I didn't know who had thought of the word *joshiryoku*. Was it a girl's role to share foods? Was it a girl's role to make sweets? Was it a girl's role to be conscious of beauty?

On the other hand, I am [also] acutely sensitive to *otokorashisa*. I have high expectations in terms of how boys should behave. For example, boys should give up their seat for girls or seniors. Boys should open the door for girls. Although I resist *joshiryoku*, I have an ideal for *otokorashisa*. This way of thinking was caused by my education in junior high school and high school time. I spent my adolescence with only girls. This time was very sensitive, but we didn't have boys around us, only mathematics and social studies teachers who were in their 60s. My friends and I talked about boys during lunchtime, but we only had information from magazines or girls' comics. We knew about boys only through Korean drama or *shojomanga*. Our ideals became bigger and bigger.

We see a kind of double bind here, as the young woman writing does not want to be constrained by gendered destiny scripts, and yet she wants men to strictly adhere to theirs. The majority of my students are women; in fact, there are usually very few boys who want to join the life writing class. Girls will even write very courageous stories about their failures, for example at school or at their part-time job, in human relations and in the way they did their work, but boys on the other hand seem to write more about their ideals, trying to make themselves look cool at times, and at other times writing about failures in a comical way but unlike the girls, tend not to want to write about mistakes they have made that they think will influence the way others see them. They might have fewer restrictions within the family but more outside, the pressure making them reluctant to write openly about such things. Gender looms large in this idea of self-translation: women are looking for a way out of social constraints, while men are intent on

maintaining their privileged image of themselves, and, as we have seen, women expect them to do so.

Participatory life writing classes

This life writing seminar is a three-year course students begin in their second year of university. In the second-year class this year, which started to meet in the middle of April, we have topic-focused discussions in class, and then students write about the topic for homework, and bring the stories to class the following week to share. The students also come to my office once a week to talk one-on-one about their stories and revise them; and then the stories are uploaded on Facebook group for the others to read. Students read each other's revised stories, click 'like' and maybe write comments.

Through this cycle of writing, sharing, discussing and rewriting, students learn about the importance of process, and the way that it shapes the class community. They then are better able to attend to the process of writing about their lives, and see that how they write about an incident they remember can be changed by approaching it from another departure point. In this way the writing prefigures the outcomes they seek in life; instead of a negative description of vexed parent-child relations, a story can propel a writer to lean that relationship with her father and mother towards the light.

The following is a story about the relationship between a student and her parents. In her first draft, she began the paragraph with the sentence, "My parents and I don't have a good relationship because we seldom meet and we don't do things together," but later in the story, she had mentioned that when her father had a day off, the family would go places together and in fact, they had been to many places together. This, she said, was something she realized while writing and rereading her story. She had thought that she and her parents didn't do much together but when she wrote about it, she realized that they had done more together than she had felt they had.

My parents and I usually don't spend much time together and it has been like that since I was a child. My father is always busy at work, so he comes home after midnight. Whenever I see him he looks tired. My mother is busy, too. She is busy with housework, because she wants to keep our clothes clean and she washes everything we wear every day, and she also has many dishes to wash because she prepares many different kinds of dishes. When I was a child, I wanted to play with her and I would say, "Play with me," but she would be doing housework so she would say, "OK, but I'm busy now, just a moment, please." By the time she finished her housework, I would be tired of waiting for her and playing by myself. It was often like that, but if my father had a day off once in a while, my mother would leave the housework and we would go out for a drive. We have been to Kyoto, Hyogo, Shiga and Nagano together, for example. Occasionally, we would go camping in

Gifu and go to Fukui to enjoy fishing. At other times we don't see each other but we can have a great time. My family is this style.

As we continued the discussion, she told us about how when her friends talked about their father giving them a birthday present she envied them, and we started to understand that more important to her than the occasional outings were the everyday things. Two months into the course, she still seemed reluctant to write too much about her true feelings because she was unhappy about the situation, but as she wrote more, she would find the will to face her parents and find a way to improve this situation. As Canadian author, Nancy Huston has observed, when translation is completed, “gaps are closed, the process has become a healing one and the self-translator is no longer caught between languages but able to exist fully in both” (qtd Susan Bassnett in Cordingly p.16). Huston links the completion to translation to healing; in this paper, I would argue that it is the process itself that is therapeutic in coming to terms with a life that is itself still in the process of unfolding, and never fully understood.

In short, translation is about understanding change in terms of relationships. It is not only about the relationship between Japanese and English, or understanding the past and present in one's own life, but the effect of writing and sharing lives. Life writing is not a secret diary. It is a series of textual selfies, which are not exclusively about “ME”; in the class, sharing also takes the form of a common topic, and the creation of a community of different approaches. Students seek other ways of doing things, and those models have an impact on your lives. This writing that we do, like translating, is for an audience of mutual participants. This is part of the participatory culture shaped by social media.

There is further interaction between first-year students considering the life writing seminar and fourth-year students who embody and can articulate what life writing is all about. (Most of the students in my second-year seminar were inspired by and hoped to become like the students soon graduating from my seminar. They were inspired by the way the seniors confidently expressed their ideas and talked about how writing about their lives had helped them to do that.)

What motivates language learning and life writing?

Attitudes towards English shift as writers trace their lives in English over the course of three years. When I asked my second-year students in April what had made them want to start learning English in the very beginning, N explained she had started to go to English lessons when she was in the first grade of elementary school because there were friends at school who could speak and write English and they looked cool. Even now, she says, her motives haven't really changed. At the shop where she works part-time, she often makes mistakes and feels incompetent, but she thinks that if she could speak English

more fluently with customers who don't speak Japanese, her coworkers might be impressed and their impressions of her might change. R explained that when she first started going to English lessons, which she decided to continue because she enjoyed them more than anything else she had tried learning, there was another girl who could speak English better than her and she felt frustrated with her inability to say what she wanted. And she wanted to be able to talk with many people in English, not just that girl. M started learning English because she wanted to write a fan letter to Johnny Depp after watching *Pirates of the Caribbean*, but later, when she was in high school, she became friends with a Malaysian girl, and was motivated to study harder to improve communication with her. Y grew up listening to English songs her mother played in the car and watching American drama on TV, and wished she could go to an American high school like she had seen in dramas, with lockers outside the classroom, big cafeterias, going to school by car and to parties on the weekend. Being able to use English is cool, and it gives them confidence.

Fourth-year students, however, no longer feel that being able to use English is their only goal. Rather, through the process of life writing in English, they are now aiming at being able to express themselves in both English and Japanese. They discover things about their lives and what they are thinking, that they might not notice if they were using Japanese, too. They are busy job-hunting and taking interviews at different companies, but they say that they are able to answer any questions they are asked about themselves because they have already been writing about it, and when they are asked about their failures, they are able to explain confidently because they have already turned the failures into experiences that are an important part of who they are, and are already moving on with their lives.

Life writing in translation as a means of re-imagining

So what is the role and value of cultivating translation awareness in this class on writing about Japanese lives in English? First of all, interaction in Japanese is often full of formulaic expressions, fixed calls and responses, so although there is sensitivity towards pragmatics and appropriate exchange, there is not necessarily much thought about the meaning of what is said. However, when writing in English, what has gone unquestioned in Japanese is suddenly under critical scrutiny. For example, from another paper I wrote, "How Do You Say *ki-wo-tsukau* in English," the Japanese expression *kiwotsukau* which often appears in conversation has a great variety of meanings. When students say that they *kiwotsukau* with different people, it could mean that they feel uncomfortable, or that they feel they have to be polite, or that they feel obliged to start a conversation or even that they have to be attentive but in Japanese conversation, they are not expected to clarify the meaning. When translating such ideas into English, though, they have to stop and think about the meanings of the Japanese expressions they are using, and decide what exactly it is that they want to say.

Participatory reading, writing, and living

Let me return to the participatory nature of reading and writing in the 21st Century, and the multiple versions of our lives that are constituted in different technologies, be it language or the Internet. When you share your life, other people's lives are affected by it. Feminism taught us to pay attention to the background, to what was hidden and unrecorded; social media foregrounds the community that we want to be a part of, and the way that our lives are networked, which was occluded in the image of the solitary writer – even the woman in a room of her own.

Here are some comments given by my second-year students about sharing their stories. N says that because her teacher and friends read her stories, she now thinks about how she can write so that her readers will enjoy her stories. She has to include details, and before anything, people must understand the meaning of what she wants to say. Y says that to write is to clarify her own opinions. Whereas in Japanese, she could just get by with vague opinions, in English she would have to give more details and explain what exactly she means. This process gives her a chance to understand what she herself thinks and feels. M also says, that through the process of translating her thoughts, she is able to look directly at what she is thinking, which she sometimes seems afraid of doing. K says that though writing in English, she has come to want to convey her thoughts more accurately. S says, that by writing in English, she has realized how much she had relied on vague Japanese expressions. She now spends more time thinking about her own feelings, and thinks more carefully about the meanings of words and expressions she and other people use, in both English and Japanese. When speaking she can use gestures but in writing, she has to be more clear and she finds this interesting. A says that she is now more conscious of the way words are spelled and pronounced, even when she is speaking. When listening to English, she can hear words that she can write, and when writing, she is more conscious of the grammar.

Since I started keeping a diary in English, I have come to realize how shallow words such as happy, sad and painful are in describing my feelings. When I write, thinking about *what* makes me happy and *how*, I feel I am becoming more intelligent and this is fun. Also, I had thought that I was doing the same things every day but when I tried writing these things down, I realized that there were no two days that were the same and felt that each day was special (^-^).

The fourth-year students say that through life writing, they are able to talk about things they wouldn't have the chance to talk about with their friends in Japanese conversations – things they might not have the courage to talk about in Japanese. Conversations over lunch with their friends can be superficial, whereas discussions in the life writing class can reveal aspects they themselves might not have noticed.

Conclusion

Many of the students say that being able to look at each other's stories on their computer or iPhone enables them to read in their own time, whenever they want to. They are always carrying their iPhones with them so if they are on a train or bus, or are waiting for somebody to come, they can spend the time reading and they don't have to look for the paper that the stories are on. There are, however, students who feel more secure if they have everything on paper, in their folder. People are in a hurry and impatient. We need to slow down. The media is a tool to change the way we write, to change the writing community but it does two things, which we need to be aware of. It speeds up our lives, and translation forces us to slow down. We need to be reminded of pace. When it was TV or movie, we could watch the screens all day long but we can feel so absorbed in our lives that we forget we are sitting at a table. We need to think about what we are doing, in our lives as well. All the excitement is not on the Internet. The network can be fun and helpful, but also as constraining as family.

References

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