

On translating Murakami Haruki: Jay Rubin's approach to Japanese – English literature translation.

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Many theories and techniques have come out of the growing field of translation studies over the last 50 years on how to translate most appropriately between the source text and the target text. However, these are often focused on differences between two western languages and they may not apply to less related language families. This paper takes a look at which theories and techniques translator Jay Rubin employs or chooses to ignore in his translation of *Norwegian wood* by Haruki Murakami. The techniques he uses and for what reasons he chose these, while ignoring some other commonly accepted theories on attaining an adequate translation are analyzed and discussed.

1. Introduction and equivalence discussion

After spending an inordinate amount of time analyzing Jay Rubin's English translation of Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* for strategies dealing with common lexical and grammatical equivalence problems, one may be a bit flummoxed to read his comments in a 2011 interview. "One is freer in translating from Japanese than from Western languages... It's more like creating the text from scratch rather than transferring phrases and sentences from one language into another, probably more fun." (Sehgal, P 2011) While ostensibly true, an overview of Rubin's work indicates he practiced what Nord describes as an instrumental homologous translation (Nord, C. 1997: 51) or what Levy (2011, cited in Munday 2016: 98) calls "a creative labour with the goal of equivalent aesthetic effect". In this essay we will examine the various translation decisions Jay Rubin makes; and while occasionally following known

translation techniques, he frequently abandons any attempt at exactly replicating what Murakami wrote. This brings us to a debate about equivalence and whether Rubin's free translation style can be considered as equivalent or not.

From the decisions Rubin makes over the first 1000 words, it is clear his Skopos(translation motive) is what Baker describes as opting for naturalness over accuracy (Baker 2011:60-1) or what Rieu(1953, cited in G.Cook 2010:65 as aiming to have the same overall effect on the target audience as the original had on its contemporaries. While Nord suggests that modern literary prose be an exoticizing documentary translation (Nord, C. 1997:48-9), Rubin freely eliminates a multitude of sentences, often using entirely different words in order to achieve an equivalent aesthetic in natural English.

Perhaps he intuitively understood what Xiabin was thinking when he asked, “Can we throw equivalence out of the window” (Xiabin 2005 as cited by Kashgary 2011: 48-9). Kashgary (2011) and Mubasyir (2015) among others have cited Xiabin and his list of six reasons to support his claim that “equivalence is absolutely necessary, but not in its absolute mathematical sense.” Point number three simply states, “Sameness to the source texts is neither possible nor even desired.”

In the 1970's, theories of equivalence were first refined by Nida who helped to “develop the path away from strict word-for-word equivalence” Munday (2016: 69). Over the next decade equivalence theories continued to develop. Vermeer (1987, cited in Nord 1997) began to view the source text as only an offer of information or raw material. Toury describes descriptive translation theory as a target oriented approach not concerned with loyalty to the source text, which he complains, has often been “grossly misperceived” (2012: 20). Baker (2011: 96) illustrates when responding to Jakobson's claim of there always being a way to create a literal translation; “This is true in theory, but in practice the lack of grammatical device can make the translation very difficult indeed.” All this is to say there are many levels of equivalence being debated.

While the debate on equivalence theory will potentially go on forever, it has been suggested that the attempt to understand equivalence is the starting point of translation theory G.Cook (2010), Perhaps Rubin's own choice to clearly stray far from any attempt at literal equivalence is because the definition of equivalence itself changes depending on the relationship between the two languages. As Shopenhauer

states, "There is no exact equivalence between two languages in terms of lexical items and concepts" (Shopenhauer as cited by Kashgary 2011). Baker (2011: 92) talks about how each language makes different choices from a wide variety of distinctions in reporting events such as with time, number, gender, shape, visibility, person, proximity, and others. "There is no uniform or objective way of reporting events in all their detail, exactly as they happen in the real world." Thus, the definition of equivalence changes depending on which languages are involved, and in this case, Japanese and English are quite different. Thus, the way Murakami expressed *The World in Japanese* and the way Rubin voices it in English were always going to be different. With these final thoughts on what attitude towards equivalence Rubin chose, let's now look specifically at all of the translation decisions Rubin made in the first 1000 words of *Norwegian Wood*.

2. Description and initial analysis

Norwegian wood is Murakami's fifth novel originally released in English, translated by Birnbaum, in 1989. The current translation analyzed here and translated by Jay Rubin was released in 2000. The 1987 original was very popular among Japanese youth at the time, selling 4 million copies and propelling Murakami to national fame. At its purest a tale of youth searching for a place in the world, this book is full of detailed imagery and poetic descriptions of places one might typically glance by without remark.

Thus for the translator the uniquely descriptive style of Murakami is important to preserve while reading naturally in English. To fully understand the task at the hand for the translators, I turn to this somewhat negative review of Murakami's work in the *Daily Telegraph*: "There are certain authors, such as John Irving and Stephen King, whose narrative voices are so powerful that they might write about the temperature and keep the reader transfixed... Murakami shares this gift, but uses it to poor effect here" McAllister (2000).

Note all single quotes (') below are from Murakami (2004) and Jay Rubin's English translation of the same novel.

From even the very first paragraph, there are several times when the exact translation could have been used, but was not. Rubin opts for dense cloud cover instead

of thick rain clouds. While both thick and rain are acceptable collates for clouds, dense cloud cover is more of collate for air traffic or describing weather from the air. It also reads more smoothly as Baker (2011: 60) talks about choosing between accuracy and naturalness. He then changes the phrase 'sitting in my seat' to 'strapped in my seat'. These sentences have different meanings but the feeling of being trapped doesn't necessarily differ from the tone of the original. The first word that really doesn't have an equivalent in English is the word *nopperi to shita*. It can mean flattened or rounded for describing objects or blank for describing facial expressions. Here Murakami uses it to describe a building, thus a marked collocation Baker (2011: 65). Rubin decides to use the word *squat*, which is generally not used for describing buildings and holds some feelings of being flattened and rounded thus capturing the meaning and maintaining a marked collocation. *Squat* is also more neutral because it can be used to describe a much wider variety of words than 'nopperi to shita'. This is a technique described by Baker (2011: 25) as choosing a more or less expressive word.

3. Do whatever works in English

As Japanese doesn't have plurals or articles it is interesting that he chooses 'cold November rains' instead of 'the cold November rain' as rain is usually singular in English as well. He then opts for 'drenched' for 'darkly painted' or 'dyed' and is required to add 'everything' for all the descriptions that have been listed together in English instead of the Japanese which lists the three with the ending 'ya' after each one, translated as, the ground crew in rain gear, the flag on a squat airport building, and the BMW billboard.

Finally, he leaves out the ending phrase 'was what I was thinking'. He could have inserted it at the beginning with 'it felt like' or some other extra wording, but Rubin appears to favor brevity and determines the meaning unnecessary. This textual example is a case of translation by omission Baker (2011: 42). In the first 1000 words of this book there are 5 times Rubin simply cuts out the equivalent of 'what I was thinking' or 'what she said', or 'what she was thinking'. There are many descriptive sentences that are passive in Japanese and Rubin always translates them into English by adding a subject and making them active, partially eliminating the need for these kinds of ending phrases. Perhaps he was liberated? to eliminate so many phrases because Murakami himself is a translator and whenever Rubin asks him questions "75% of the time he answers, "Do whatever works in English." He wants the book

to succeed as literature in the target language rather than slavishly adhering to his grammar or sentence structure. He's a very experienced translator, after all" Sehgal (2011).

4. Rubin's translation

As we move further through the text, Rubin continues to change things as he sees fit. Rubin makes another translation by omission at the beginning of the second paragraph. The Japanese reads 'once the plane had finished landing the nonsmoking lights were turned off and low volume music began flowing from ceiling speakers'. The English translation simply reads "Once the plane was on the ground, soft music began to flow from ceiling speakers". He decided the entire image of the nonsmoking signs was unnecessary and opted to omit the language in the name of brevity. The collocate 'soft' for music goes very well in this situation and contains the meaning of 'low volume' or 'quiet'. This is a selection of a better collocate in English which leads to a more natural sentence. A less experienced translator may have been tempted to use 'quiet' rather than search for the better collocate 'soft'. Rubin avoided well the pitfall described by Baker (2011: 58) as "the engrossing effect of source text patterning."

The melody of Norwegian Wood is written as sending a wave of confusion over him in Japanese, but Rubin chose to use an equally common expression of similar meaning 'sent a shudder through me'. The following sentence he then says 'it hit' him harder than ever when the Japanese is 'it shook him with confusion'. His translation gets the idea across very clearly with fewer words. He uses different words to describe the same situation perhaps more naturally. Though he could have stuck with expressions more similar to the ST (source text), he made a translation by paraphrase using a related word Baker (2011: 36).

5. Paragraphs three and four: Naturalness over accuracy

Throughout the 1000 words, Rubin often practices omission, but Murakami makes no mention of 'looking out the plane window' and simply says 'tilted his head up and gazed at the dark clouds hanging over the North Sea'. This is a choice for naturalness over accuracy as it would have sounded strange to omit 'out the window in English'. To capture the dark feeling of the clouds Rubin strays from the Japanese 'float' to add to the dark feeling by using 'hanging'. Considering the scene and the emotional pain

of the protagonist, 'floating' clouds would be way too airy and light of a collocational meaning Baker (2011: 57).

6. Dialogue paragraphs five, and six: non-native English translation

As there are no articles in Japanese, Murakami has to use the word 'same' to identify the stewardess. Rubin can simply say 'the stewardess came back to check on me', with 'the' letting us know it is the same one. He then shortens 'it was Autumn of 1969, and I was about to turn 20' to 'Autumn 1969 and soon I would be twenty'. Shorter and more concise with no need or intent to follow the text exactly as per the discussion of his Skopos in detail in the introduction section.

Rubin's decision to edit the dialogue in the following section is a bit surprising as the original contains both Japanese and English. As neither the protagonist nor the flight attendant are native English speakers, the minute difference from the way Murakami wrote the original English and how a native English speaker would communicate feels trivial. The only non-native English sentences are 'It's alright now, thank you, I only felt lonely, you know' is retranslated as 'I'm fine thanks, Just feeling kind of blue'. This is an example of a cultural substitution Baker (2011: 29) as while in many languages people don't hesitate to ask about or admit loneliness so directly, particularly North American English speakers don't feel comfortable admitting loneliness, particularly not men, and especially not to strangers Cargan (2007: 153). Feeling kind of blue is a much more comfortable way of admitting such a variety of sadness.

The other slightly non-native phrasing that Rubin retranslates doesn't change the meaning at all, and one wonders whether it is necessary or not to take away the atmosphere of non-native English speakers communicating with each other in a foreign country. Perhaps Rubin was instructed to do it by Murakami when he told Rubin "Do whatever works in English" Sehgal (2011). 'Well I feel same way, same thing, once in a while' becomes 'It happens to me, too, every once in a while.' Sure it sounds more like a native speaker, but why should a German airline hostess be expected to speak English like a native?

Finally, although he leaves in the 'she said' in the conversation with the stewardess, at the end the Japanese text reads 'Auf Wiedersehen! I also replied'. In the English 'I also replied' is removed, just as it is consistently throughout the translation as previously discussed. Does he do this just in the name of brevity or because he is writing freely according to his own instincts? or both?

7. First descriptive paragraph: Sheer pragmatism

Rubin's TT (target text) approach of "creating text from scratch" not only facilitates the translation of Murakami's long, multi-clause descriptive sentences into smooth natural English easier to achieve; it also allows him to reconstruct the sentences into the active voice, primarily used in English, from the passive voice so often used in Japanese and in these paragraphs by Murakami. The passive voice allows Murakami to string clause after clause together without a subject. Here, Rubin takes the three long Japanese clauses and cuts them into three active voice sentences. 'The mountains' the subject of the first sentence, 'the October breeze' the subject of the second, and 'one long streak of cloud' the subject of the third. He is presented with another marked collocation with the use of the word 'tataeru' which is usually used for eyes filling or brimming with tears, beaming with joy, or wearing a smile, not describing a mountain. 'Wear' is also generally not used in English for describing landscapes, but rather faces or expressions, thus his translation as 'the mountains wore a deep, brilliant green' accurately maintains the marked nature of the word selection.

'Azayaka' is generally associated with 'bright' or 'vivid' when describing colors in Japanese. Here Rubin again does another good job of avoiding the engrossing effect of source text patterning as 'brilliant' is much better than 'bright' in this description Baker (2011: 58). He replaces 'one long skinny cloud' with 'one long streak of cloud' as while the use of long skinny is not unheard of for describing clouds, 'streak' contains the same meaning in just one word. It is also potentially a more general word for describing clouds Baker (2011: 23).

Instead of translating the following sentence as it stands passively in Japanese, 'the sky was so far-off that it would almost hurt to look at it', Rubin uses a grammatical pronoun, 'It almost hurt to look at that far-off sky'. This usage of 'It' for inferring that he was looking does not exist in Japanese and makes the sentence active to reflect natural English language use. The way to simplify this sentence and attain naturalness required use of a grammatical pronoun that doesn't occur in the source language. Again Rubin's attitude of rewriting text from scratch comes across as sheer pragmatism when working with two such dissimilar grammatical systems.

With the added meaning of articles in English, Rubin could have simply said 'the wind', but chose to add a poetic twist and creates 'a puff of wind' which he uses as his subject to combine three long descriptive clauses into one sentence. The second

phrase especially would have been problematic because it ends with the verb implying 'we could hear dogs barking from a far distance'. To connect everything into one active voice sentence, 'puff of wind' continues all the way through the descriptions as the subject finally 'sending back snatches of distant barking'. This technique of creating a subject and using it to tie descriptive clauses together is a seminal strategy in his translation playbook. Another minor adjustment he made to put all of the clauses into one sentence was to say 'the wind went through her hair' rather than having it 'blow' her hair in the ST. Trying to add the wind blowing her hair around would have been hard to fit in and potentially would have made the whole sentence too cumbersome. Again naturalness over accuracy.

He elects to replace the Japanese 'pierced through the woods' with the subtler 'slipped into the woods'. The collocational meaning of piercing wind doesn't accurately describe the wind in Murakami's image as it first 'crosses' the meadow. It doesn't sound like the aggressive or powerful wind the image of piercing wind brings. 'Slipped through the woods' more accurately captures the intended collocational meaning Baker (2011: 57).

In the following lines he then leaves out an entire sentence. He translates the first sentence as 'we heard no other sound' and then cuts the following sentence all together, 'There wasn't a single sound that arrived upon our ears'. This demonstrates again that he is far from reticent of making omissions in favor of brevity or naturalness. There is little loss of meaning in the translation by omission. Rubin then cunningly shortens the following sentence by eliminating the Japanese phrases for 'passing people by' with the succinctly put 'we met no people'.

At this point in the analysis, Rubin's resistance to the engrossing effect of source language patterns becomes more apparent as the number of times he varies the words used in the ST increases. In the end of this paragraph Murakami uses fly and fly off respectively while leap and dart are used in the translation. 'We walked a long' becomes 'we ambled along'. In such prosaic imagery as well, but journalistic standards require writers of English to avoid using the same words repeatedly as it is generally frowned upon Munday (2016: 99). Often using more expressive words than the original is the opposite of using superordinate or less expressive word selections suggested by Baker (2011: 23-5) for dealing with translation problems at word level.

8. Second and third descriptive paragraphs: writing from scratch

When I translate the first few lines of this paragraph myself I end up with very natural sounding English describing the surroundings. Thus, upon initial evaluation it was odd to read 'When I was in the scene' and 'I didn't give a damn about the scenery that day'. However, in the Japanese text Murakami names the scenery three times in the following descriptive clauses. Naming the scene as the subject allowed Rubin to tie all of the clauses together into one sentence substituting 'the scenery' for the useful pronoun 'it'. Rubin translates, 'I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that eighteen years later I would recall it in such detail.'

'Omake' is usually used to talk about free food, bonus prizes, or store gifts. In this situation talking about being in love it has no direct equivalent in English. Rubin could have chosen 'and to make matters worse' or 'on top of everything else' which both share negative connotations, but he chose the shorter 'And worse, I was in love'. This strategy is similar to what Baker (2011: 78) describes as using an expressions whose form is different but whose meaning is similar.

Next, another shortened sentence. 'Love that had taken me to a very complicated place' is simply 'Love with complications'. The expression 'the last thing on my mind' is used to much more concisely convey 'I didn't have any time to think about the scenery', another example of naturalness over accuracy or faith to the ST, this time by use of an idiom. An additional change he makes is to pass up the direct equivalent for 'ridgeline' with the longer but more poetic 'the line of the hills'. Even though a direct equivalent exists he paraphrases the word. He ostensibly makes this decision to fit in with the other descriptions in the list. 'The faint chill of the wind, the line of the hills, the barking of a dog' sounds more uniform than 'the faint chill of the wind, the mountain ridgeline, the barking of a dog'.

A further example of Rubin rewriting from scratch is the final line of this paragraph is how he changes 'all I'm left holding is a background with no people' to 'sheer scenery, with no people up front'. While the translation doesn't follow the original specifically, the end product conveys mostly the same meaning.

9. The remaining two descriptive paragraphs: in as few words as possible

In the beginning of this section there are more observations of rewriting the text. This has already been well covered in this analysis. 'Tiny mole' becomes 'microscopic mole'. Again seeming to translate by using a more expressive word and perhaps to increase the variety of vocabulary words. Instead of 'of course, given time enough' Rubin uses 'true, given time enough'. Later on, Rubin eliminates all of the speculative wondering as to why Naoko's face first appears in profile, 'maybe because we used to always be out walking together side by side?' becomes 'because we were always out walking together, side by side'. He then eliminates the entire next sentence of the protagonist talking to himself about how walking next to each other must be the reason. In the end, not that much is lost from the omission, but it certainly deviates from the ST.

Following this is a challenging translation problem. In the ST there are 7 long clauses strung together in one sentence paragraph all passive voice listing the memories and ending with 'all these images start piling up and suddenly her face is there'. To deal with the difficulty of Japanese sentence structure; verb at the end, no subject, and passive voice, he combines all of these into one sentence. He commences with his own invention, 'I start by joining images' and ends with the same 'suddenly her face is there', creating an active sentence with the subject and the verb at the beginning.

In the last line of text under analysis, bringing it to 1000 words and finishing the fifth page of the source publication, 'It takes time for Naoko's image to appear in this way' is translated by omission to 'I do need that time' Baker (2011: 42). The process of translating by omission heavily used by Rubin suggests that while not listed in any of the translation studies textbooks, one of the main pillars of translating from Japanese to English is perhaps to write in as few words as possible.

10. Conclusions

I have discussed many ways in which the author has dealt with lexical and grammatical equivalence often by going his own way, reshuffling, omitting, rewording. Sometimes very successfully taking a long complex clauses and rewriting them to sound very natural, making his approach come across as very pragmatic. Replacing a phrase that doesn't have equivalence with an idiom. However, he sticks to the general meaning of what Murakami originally wrote. Millions of people enjoy reading

Murakami's works in English and Rubin's translations come highly regarded. While he may not have stuck to intertextual equivalence as Nord (1997) describes it, he sticks to the intratextual equivalence according to his Skopos of recreating the text from scratch to achieve natural English. The ideas and descriptions in the story are accurately reflected in the target text in a way which reads much more like a native English speaker would have written than a more faithful documentary translation of the Japanese text.

Rubin's proclivity for starting the text from scratch may or may not consciously follow any of the strategies discussed in the literature. He may also have not spent any time theorizing on what the true definition of acceptable equivalence should be. However, he does often follow known techniques and capably avoids many common pitfalls. In this article we have documented many occurrences of translate by omission, steering clear of the engrossing effect of source text patterning, focusing on naturalness over accuracy, upholding marked collocations, cultural substitution, and successfully navigating the grammatical differences, especially of active and passive voice and clauses with missing subjects in the ST. For what it is worth, after exhaustively pouring over the first 1000 words of his translation, I feel he does a wonderful job.

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