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Mokusatsu: One Word, Two Lessons

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mokusatsu 黙殺—*suru*, *v.* take no notice of; treat (anything) with silent contempt; ignore [by keeping silence]; remain in a wise and masterly inactivity.

—Kenkyusha's New Japanese - English Dictionary, p. 1129.

The story of how an ill-chosen translation of the Japanese word *mokusatsu* led to the United States decision to drop the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima is well known to many linguists. But perhaps it would not be amiss to retell it briefly just in case some reader of this essay is unfamiliar with the word—and in the hope that readers may be inspired to avoid the two tragic linguistic errors that the story points up.

In July of 1945 allied leaders meeting in Potsdam submitted a stiffly-worded declaration of surrender terms and waited anxiously for the Japanese reply. The terms had included a statement to the effect that any negative answer would invite "prompt and utter destruction." Truman, Churchill, Stalin, and Chiang Kai-Shek stated that they hoped that Japan would agree to surrender unconditionally and prevent devastation of the Japanese homeland and that they patiently awaited Japan's answer.

Reporters in Tokyo questioned Japanese Premier Kantaro Suzuki about his government's reaction to the Potsdam Declaration. Since no formal decision had been reached at the time, Suzuki, falling back on the politician's old standby answer to reporters, replied that he was withholding comment. He used the Japanese word *mokusatsu*, derived from the word for "silence." As can be seen from the dictionary entry quoted at the beginning of this essay, however, the word has other meanings quite different from that intended by Suzuki. Alas, international news agencies saw fit to tell the world that in the eyes of the Japanese government the ultimatum was "not worthy of comment." U. S. officials, angered by the tone of Suzuki's statement and obviously seeing it as another typical example of the fanatical Banzai and Kamikaze spirit, decided on stern measures. Within ten days the decision was made to drop the atomic bomb, the bomb was dropped, and Hiroshima was leveled. [1]

Almost without exception, whenever this story is told, mention is made of the poor translation job. One short magazine article [2] calls it "The World's Most Tragic Translation," "the ill-chosen translation of a common Japanese word," "disastrous oversight in this most important of all messages," and "that inauspicious translation." Indeed, there seems to be little question about the translator's culpability.

Many people, especially non-linguists, seem to feel that every word in one language has an exact counterpart, a perfectly equivalent match, in every other language. So, given a word in Language A, this can mean only one thing in Language B, and that one thing will be exactly what was meant in Language A. Obviously, this is not true. Different peoples with different cultural backgrounds view things differently and their languages reflect this difference of viewpoints. For example, given six animals common to several regions, one language group may categorize the animals into two classes because of size and have only two words in their language (one for large animals, one for small animals); another people may use the animals' eating habits as their criterion and also have two words (one for carnivores, one for herbivores) encompassing different groups of animals. Another people may subdivide the animals by color and end up with four words in their language, and yet another people may not do any subdividing at all; so they'll have six words to use in talking about these animals. It's also possible that some other group may have separate names for the male and female of the species (as English does for *ram* and *ewe*, *gander* and *goose*, etc.), so that they will have twelve different words! In addition, there are other criteria that could be used, and the number of words could be increased or decreased; or several languages might have the same number of words but, using completely different criteria for their subdivision, they would concern completely different things.

Another linguistic problem that keeps every word in one language from having a counterpart in every other language is that often something which is commonplace to speakers of one language will be totally unknown to speakers of another tongue. They have no concept of the thing; so how can they have a word for it? This is a problem frequently encountered by Bible translators. How, for example, do you translate "Lamb of God" into an Eskimo dialect whose speakers don't have the slightest idea of what sheep are? Or "anchor" into a language spoken by nomadic dwellers in the midst of the Sahara Desert?

Quite often a term *can* be translated word for word, but the resulting translation carries completely disparate meanings in both languages because of cultural differences. A missionary in Africa

ran into this problem with the sentence, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (1 John, 3:20). In that region only a thief knocks on doors; if anyone responds, the intruder runs away. Visitors with honest intent shout the name of the person in the hut. The translator solved the problem by rendering the verse, "Behold, I stand at the door and call." [3]

Bible translation points up some of the problems that exist for all translators, and recent translations of the Scriptures into English show an acute awareness of the specific problem that not every text in one language can be readily, idiomatically, and unequivocally translated into another tongue. Thus, while the King James, Douai, and 1917 Jewish Publication Society versions of the Bible are singularly free of—or, at least, mighty sparing with—notes, more recent translations—be they Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, non-denominational, or interdenominational (such as the 38-volume Anchor Bible)—contain copious notes, explanations of doubtful readings, alternate versions, comments on uncertainty about certain obscure words, etc. It came as a shock to many people to discover that Moses and Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul didn't speak the majestic-sounding English prose of the King James version as their native tongue, but it comes as an even greater shock to find out that the Bible they grew up with may have contained some questionable translations.

This really shouldn't be too surprising, though. Besides the cultural differences existing between the original writers of the Bible and us, there is also the time difference, and modern Bible translators are quite correct in admitting their inability to capture the precise shade of meaning in an old or obscure Hebrew or Greek word. Their willingness to admit their limitations should serve as a shining example to all translators to be honest with the people who will have to read their translation. If a word is capable of variant translations, this fact should be conveyed to the reader, provided that there is no way of clearing up the ambiguity by research.

Whoever it was who decided to translate *mokusatsu* by the one meaning (even though that is the first definition in the dictionary) and didn't add a note that the word might also mean nothing stronger than "to withhold comment" did a horrible disservice to the people who read his translation, people who knew no Japanese, people who would probably never see the original Japanese text and who would never know that there was an ambiguous word used. As a matter of principle, that unknown translator should have pointed out that word has two meanings, thereby enabling others to decide on a suitable course of action.

But that choice was lacking; the harsh decision was made on the basis of the one translation available; and the consequence was disastrous. To be sure, the case of *mokusatsu* is an extreme example, but there are many, many other words in scores of other languages that have equally discrete nuances of meaning. Choosing the wrong meaning or failing to inform a decision-maker that there are such nuances could well have unexpected repercussions. Suppose that someone quoted a report about a Cuban farmer who placed a bomb on his farm near the fences of the U. S. Naval Base at Guantanamo. Can you imagine the reaction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, especially if no one told them that the Spanish words translated as "placed a bomb" might also mean "installed a pump"?

Many translators hesitate to admit publicly that they can't give a precise equivalent for an ambiguous text. They feel that saying that a word can have two or more equally possible meanings is a sign of their inadequacy. They fail to realize that if they pick the wrong one, and later results prove that they guessed wrong, their prestige will sink even lower than if they had insisted that the term was ambiguous. But the fault isn't always the translator's. Quite often non-linguist supervisors fail to understand that languages don't always have a one-to-one correspondence in their vocabularies and they will insist that the translator give them just one meaning and "cut out that 'ambiguous word' nonsense!"

Even if some high American officials ever knew that the Japanese Premier had used the word *mokusatsu*, they probably wouldn't believe that it could be translated in either of two ways. More than likely some high-ranking officer (probably a bird colonel) in the Pentagon asked the top Japanese translator (probably a nisei Pfc) about *mokusatsu* and then refused to believe the story about two meanings. You can almost picture this colonel pounding his desk and red-facedly bellowing, "Whaddyamean telling me that the word means either 'I am maintaining silence' or 'I'm treating it with contempt'? Dammit, private, I can't go tell the Joint Chiefs something like that! I gotta give 'em straight facts, not multiple-choice tests! Now you quit beatin' around the bush and give me one answer that I can tell 'em!"

But even if this scene never happened in the Pentagon, the fault for the *mokusatsu* incident is not entirely the translator's. Believe it or not, the real culprit is no less a personage than Kantaro Suzuki, the Japanese Prime Minister himself! [4] After all, there would have been no translation problem if he had not used an ambiguous word for such an important statement.

However, politicians are notorious for preferring words that are either meaningless or so full of meanings that no one can be sure of

just what they do mean. In all probability the word *mokusatsu* was well beloved by Japanese officials as their equivalent of "No comment!" simply because it does have such a broad spectrum of meanings. A politician could use it and not really be saying anything he couldn't squirm out of later; but it also left him the opportunity to claim later that he had long been against the course of action under discussion. Terms like these are the ones that Theodore Roosevelt once referred to as "weasel words" because politicians have sucked all the meaning out of them the way that a weasel sucks out the contents of an egg.

Politicians aren't the only ones who use meaningless words. Newsmen are also guilty of this sin, and so are many people right here in our own agency. For instance, TV journalists and NSA writers both seem to like the word "indicate" and they use it over and over and over in a variety of senses ranging from "hint" to "show conclusively," and even as a synonym for "say." During World War II the word "aircraft" became the "in" word, despite its vagueness. In the interim since it gained such popularity, I have seen the word used to translate foreign texts where the original was extremely specific in talking about one airplane, several airplanes, a bomber, crop-dusters, several helicopters, a trainer, a seaplane, or a DC-4, among others. But the translators or reporters uniformly used the word "aircraft" in titles and texts. I have seen items with the word "aircraft" used throughout, and it was necessary to read several paragraphs—in one case, three whole pages—to find a pronoun referring to the "aircraft" so that I knew whether the word was singular or plural. And I've even seen a few documents in which, even after careful reading and rereading, it was absolutely impossible to determine whether one or many "aircraft" was or were meant.

There are many other examples of ambiguous words that could be cited, but I think that these two exemplify the second lesson that can be learned from the *mokusatsu* incident: Try to avoid ambiguous words!

Some years ago I recall hearing a statement known as "Murphy's Law" which says that "If it can be misunderstood, it will be." *Mokusatsu* supplies adequate proof of that statement. After all, if Kantaro Suzuki had said something specific like "I will have a statement after the cabinet meeting," or "We have not reached any decision yet," he could have avoided the problem of how to translate the ambiguous word *mokusatsu* and the two horrible consequences of its inauspicious translation: the atomic bombs and this essay.

NOTES

- [1] The story is told in greater detail in William Craig's *The Fall of Japan*, published by Dial, 1967.
- [2] *The World's Most Tragic Translation*, unsigned article in *Quinto Lingo*, January 1968, p. 64.
- [3] The linguistic problems cited in the preceding paragraph were solved by equally ingenious methods. Many Eskimos catch a seal, cook it, and eat it at a communal meal before a big fishing expedition; so translators more or less equate this propitiatory seal with the sacrificial lamb eaten by the Israelites before their departure from Egypt (Exodus, 12: 3-11) and the expression "Seal of God" is used for "Lamb of God." At the other extreme, Saharan natives do use pegs or picket stakes driven in the sand as a means of "anchoring" their camels and horses at night. So the American Bible Society rendered "steadfast anchor for the soul" (Hebrews, 6:19) as "steadfast picket peg for the soul" when they translated the Bible into the language of one of the Saharan nomadic tribes.
- [4] Unfortunately, Mr. Suzuki will never know that I blamed him for all this trouble. He died 17 April 1948.