

THE EMPEROR'S SPEECH: THAT CONTROVERSIAL BIT AGAIN

By Simon Prentis

Most people count it a rare event when anything directly related to their everyday work makes it into the national papers. This is probably especially true for those of us labouring so tirelessly behind the scenes in the fields of translation and interpreting, which, despite their vital role in promoting international communication, seldom attract much in the way of comment, let alone thanks. So I am sure that I was not the only one in the Network to have been both startled and intrigued to discover that the Times had devoted the majority of its front page on May 28th to examining the finer points of Japanese/English translation. Sadly, only the bitter memories of the Pacific War seem to have the power to elevate this otherwise deeply un-sexy issue to such dizzy heights, but there it was, complete with quotations from the original Japanese and a battery of opinions about 'accuracy' and 'intention'. Heavy stuff to have to ingest over breakfast.

The main article reported the controversy surrounding the Emperor Akihito's speech made at the State Banquet held two days previously, and focused on the translation of 「深い心の痛み」, the phrase generally identified as being the most contentious. It also quoted excerpts from a rather primly worded press statement issued by the Japanese Embassy claiming that the official English translation was 'the only one that reflects the true and faithful meaning and intention of the Japanese original'. Far be it from me to question the authority of the Embassy to accurately divine the 'meaning and intention' of the Emperor's words; but my professional curiosity was stirred, if not shaken, by the suggestion that there could be 'only one' translation able to reflect this, or any other text. So I called up the Information Section at the Embassy and asked if it was possible to get copies of both the Japanese and English texts, which they kindly faxed through to me. They make interesting reading.

The first surprise is that the translation appears not to have been done, or even revised, by a native speaker of English. Whilst there is an understandable need for such a sensitive text to be translated, or at least supervised, 'in house', the very fact that the Emperor's words were bound to be the subject of intense scrutiny during his visit to the UK should have made it all the more important for his words to be culturally transparent. It is axiomatic in the professional world of translation that one should not work out of one's own language; and except where there is an 'exotic' effect to be gained by the use of non-standard grammar or phraseology, the price paid is usually a certain stiffness, with a consequent distancing from the target audience.

The second surprise is that, whilst there are obviously no gross errors of fact or meaning in the translation, there are several significant rephrasings and omissions which, for my money, clearly affect the subtler nuances of register and tone. Of course, even the disputed translation of 「深い心の痛み」 can still be said, with hand on heart, to 'reflect' the meaning and intention of the original. Diplomats, like lawyers, are not paid their lavish salaries for nothing. One could legitimately question how far a translation is justified in compensating for any unstated 'intention' in a source text (an argument which can end up sounding like the defence for date rape). But the more serious point is that the sensitivity and even the sincerity of the speaker can be put at risk by such an editing process, which, however innocent in intent, may still seem like duplicity.

The full text of the speech runs to about 2,000 characters, and to attempt a complete analysis here would, apart from trying the patience of the gentle reader, take up far too much space. So I shall limit my comments to the section which contains the phrase that was the immediate cause of all the trouble, merely noting in passing that the preceding paragraphs about the history of Anglo-British relations yield several hints that some form of stagecraft might be at large in the translation. To give just one example, the phrase commenting on Japan's reopening to the West, 「鎖国政策を遂行することができなくなった」 ('It became impossible to pursue a policy of isolation') is rendered somewhat coyly in the English translation as 'Japan decided to end isolation'.

The original text of the key passage is as follows:

「しかし、こうして育まれた両国の関係が、第二次世界大戦によって損なわれたことは誠に悲しむべきことであります。この戦いにより、様々な形で苦難を経験した大勢の人々のあったことは、私どもにとっても忘れられない記憶となって、今日に至っております。戦争により人々の受けた傷を思う時、深い心の痛みを覚えますが、この度の訪問に当たっても、私どもはこうしたことを心にとどめ、滞在の日々を過ごしたいと思っています。両国の間に二度とこのような歴史の刻まれぬことを衷心より願うとともに、このような過去の苦しみを経ながらも、その後計り知れぬ努力をもって、両国の未来の友好のために力を尽くしてこられた人々に、深い敬意と感謝の念を表したく思います。」

The official translation of which is given as:

"It truly saddens me, however, that the relationship so nurtured between our two countries should have been marred by the Second World War. The Empress and I can never forget the many kinds of suffering so many people have undergone because of that war. At the thought of the scars of war that they bear, our hearts are filled with deep sorrow and pain. All through our visit here, this thought will never leave our minds. We sincerely hope that such a history will never be repeated between our two nations. At the same time, may we express our profound respect and gratitude to those people who, despite such past sufferings, looking towards the future, have dedicated immeasurable efforts to the cause of friendship between our two countries."

The immediate thing to note is the difference in pacing. The original consists of four sentences that flow together in a balanced, natural rhythm. The translation has broken this up into six sentences, which, with the exception of the last, are short, direct and, taken together, somewhat staccato in effect. There is, of course, no hard and fast rule that requires a translator to maintain the syntax and sentence structure of the original, especially if to do so would create awkwardness in the target language. There may be occasions, also, when a translator is asked to break the original into simpler sections to make it easier to read for a speaker with a more limited command of the language. But neither of these conditions would appear to apply here. Instead, the overriding effect is to make the sentiments expressed seem more simplistic, if not insensitive.

Then there is the change of tone. The first phrase of the translation, 'It truly saddens me...', presumably corresponds to 「誠に悲しむべきことでありました」. Whilst there is no doubt room for debate over the implications of the past tense in this context, the more interesting point is the decision to personalise the utterance in the translation. Call me old-fashioned (and I am certainly no advocate of formality in J-E translation) but that does seem to be shifting gears somewhat. Even allowing for the undeniable fondness for circumlocution exhibited in official Japanese speeches, it has the effect of chasing the measured diplomatic tone of the original over the event horizon. As an exercise I gave this passage to a group of Japanese interpreting students at SOAS, and, unsurprisingly, none of their suggestions included a personal pronoun. The structure of the original Japanese is quite clearly framed to avoid making it a purely personal expression, which, Emperor or no, could certainly have been done if that was the 'intention'.

The next sentence states that 'the Empress and I can never forget...', which is obviously cognate with 「私どもにとっても忘れられない記憶となって」, but whatever happened to 「今日に至っております」, let alone that piquant little 「も」? The statement that they can simply 'never forget' seems distinctly abrupt in expressing a sentiment that in the original is both elegant and evocative, stressing the lingering consciousness, even amidst the pomp and circumstance of State, of 'an indelible memory that remains to this day', not of 'the many kinds of suffering' in themselves, but of 'the fact that so many people underwent so many kinds of suffering as a result of this conflict'.

The translation of the crucial 「戦争により人々の受けた傷を思う時、深い心の痛みを覚えますが」 is equally puzzling. 'At the thought of the scars of war that they bear, our hearts are filled with deep sorrow and pain.' It would perhaps be unfair to complain of disingenuousness, especially since, according to the Times, the Embassy have admitted adding the phrase 'deep sorrow' in order to make the meaning 'unambiguous'. But there is no obvious reason why the more abstract and statesmanlike terms of the original could not have been conveyed, equally elegantly, by a similar formulation in English: 'It is deeply painful to recall the injuries that people suffered due to this war'. This would also have the merit of allowing the reader, as in the original, the space to decide for themselves whether or not this is a personal statement, as well as offering some leeway in determining which 'people' are being referred to.

The official translation breaks off the sentence at this point, severing the continuity conferred by that delicately hanging 「が」. Instead, it offers the rather brusque 'All through our visit, this thought will never leave our minds.' This seems a strangely abstract and abbreviated expression of the thought behind 「この度の訪問に当たっても、私どもはこうしたことを心にとどめ、滞在の日々を過ごしたいと思っています。」, which implies not only a clear intention on the part of the Emperor and Empress to be conscious of the painful memories despite the official nature of their visit, but a desire to express this personally, rather than as a simple statement of fact.

The final section looks to the future with explicit, if formal, expressions of hope and gratitude for the efforts being made. But even here a trick or two is missed, not least the opportunity to improve the flow of the translation by weeding out the stylistic inelegancies. In terms of register, too, the expressive use of 「衷心より」 in the original would have been better mirrored in translation by a phrase such as 'from the bottom of my heart', which conveys a more genuine feeling than the more standard 'sincerely', so often a hint in English that the sincerity is merely formal.

As a working translator myself, I would not wish to unjustly impugn the skills of the translators employed by the Japanese Government, however anonymous. Given the situation, it is more than likely that purely linguistic criteria were not the only ones brought to bear in producing the finished translation, and insofar as official texts in both Japanese and English were to be made available, there must have been a temptation to fine-tune the phrasing of each to suit the differing expectations of the two largely monolingual audiences. The Times article states that 'a team of linguists' were involved, which, if true, does little to support the case for translation by committee. But whatever the circumstances, the texts themselves are what ultimately count.

It would probably not be unfair to say that, as an unambiguous expression of contrition, the Emperor's speech is on a par with the Queen's message to the nation after the death of Princess Diana. But through the inevitable constraints of the formal language, the Japanese original expresses an underlying sense of regret and sadness that comes across as genuine. Whether or not this is adequate in terms of addressing the concerns of the ex-POW's is another matter, which I shall not attempt to examine here. But nevertheless I feel it is a pity that the sentiments expressed in the Emperor's speech appear not to have been conveyed in the official translation as eloquently as they might have been.

Finally, after all that criticism, it is time to put my money where my mouth is. I am not going to claim that my version cannot be improved on, but I would like to hope that it goes a little way to restoring some of the dignity and humanity that, in my opinion, the official translation tends to obscure. It may well, of course, open up areas of 'ambiguity'. But these are present in the original, and are, after all, the soul of good diplomacy.

"It is, however, a matter of great sadness that the relationship between our two countries, fostered in this way, should have been marred by the Second World War. The fact that so many people suffered in so many ways as a result of this conflict is, for us as well, an indelible memory which remains to this day. It is deeply painful to recall the injuries that people endured due to this war, and even on the occasion of this visit, we intend to be fully mindful of this fact throughout the course of our stay. We pray from the bottom of our hearts that such events should not be repeated between us, and would also like to express our deep respect and gratitude to those people who, despite undergoing such suffering in the past, have gone on to devote themselves with boundless energy to promoting the cause of friendship between our two countries."