

# SO WHO'D WANT TO BE A TRANSLATOR ANYWAY?

by Simon Prentis



As one of the doting greybeards who've stayed the course from the early days, perhaps I may be allowed to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our august organ with a few reflections on the nature of what it is that we do, and why we might want to keep doing it. Just in case anyone is interested to join the debate...

Let's face it, being a translator is a pretty thankless task. Well, that's not entirely true. Most of the time we do at least get paid for our work, which is certainly a form of thanks. And sometimes we even get thanked verbally – but for the most part the thanks we get tend to come from people who are just grateful that we have done something that they couldn't do themselves, rather than people who are actually able to appreciate how well (or otherwise) we may have done the job. But while there's always a temptation to grumpily deflect any such well-meant compliments with "And how would you know?", it's probably asking too much to expect things to be otherwise – just as a plumber doesn't expect to be complimented on the skill and expertise with which he's managed to re-route a problematic piece of piping under the floorboards, or the quality of his brazing work. They're usually quite happy to accept our innocently trusting thanks and the large cheque that accompanies them – even though the pipe may well end up leaking again a few weeks later. Maybe we too should just be happy to take the money and run.

And most of the time, we are. After all, we have a skill that has taken time and effort to master – in that sense it's a trade like any other, and we should be glad just to have one in these hard-pressed days. But it's still a strange thing to have ended up becoming, a translator. It is definitely an odd-ball profession. It would be interesting to know how many people actually set out to be one from scratch, rather than just finding it was

something that they could do along the way. It's rare enough these days for anyone brought up in the English-speaking world to be able to speak another language fluently anyway, let alone well enough to become a translator, so with the ongoing government cutbacks in foreign language education, it will no doubt become even more so. And given that MT is now hard on our heels, we're increasingly an endangered species.

So why would you want to do it in the first place?

For the most part, especially in the case of the more 'exotic' languages, there is often some kind of non-linguistic motivation involved – a family connection or a personal interest in some aspect of the culture, rather than just being idle curiosity. Or maybe you find that you happen to have a talent for learning languages. But whatever it is, there comes a point when you have to take it seriously if you're aiming to be a translator. There's a world of difference between being able to get by in a language and absorbing enough of it to feel really at home with it, to get it under your skin. As we all know, the grammar and vocabulary are merely the framework – it's familiarity with the wider culture that underpins it, the background assumptions of general knowledge that native speakers take for granted when they speak and write, that really allows you to understand a language. And picking that up takes time and commitment.

In my own case, at a certain point I think it just became a challenge that I decided to take on. I hadn't really set out with the expectation of being able to understand Japanese particularly well when I started living there, and was surprised that I began to be able to. And as my confidence grew I decided to see if I could learn it well enough to get paid to translate it. I don't think I ever thought I was going to make a career out of it, and I'm not sure – even now – that I actually have. To begin with it was a way of supplementing my income as a teacher, but after a while it became something I found I could earn more at in a shorter time than teaching, and the balance just started to shift.

I'm sure there are people out there who set out to become a professional translator, with the intention of being able to derive a sufficient income to live on. But the fact is that it's inevitably an uncertain business. We are lucky to be working with a language pair that is still relatively uncommon in Europe, but if you're a translator of European languages, regular and/or well-paid work is increasingly hard to come by unless you have a job with the EU or the UN. And even for E/J, there are many more people who would like to do it than there is actually work available to do.

Part of the problem is the nature of the work that people are willing to pay money to have translated. At university, one of the main reasons a person might become interested or even encouraged to become a translator is a love of the literature. But for

any language – let alone Japanese – the market for literary translation into English is woefully small. The English-speaking world has become so solipsistic that it rarely shows any real interest in the literary products of other cultures (beyond the current fad for racy Scandinavian whodunits), and even where it does, the market is usually tiny. It's hard enough to find people under the age of 30 who read books anyway, but if you do find a publisher willing to commission a translation, the amount they are likely to pay will never reflect the effort that goes into it.

I've just finished translating a book, and despite being a relatively slim volume, it was sheer hell. I should've known it was going to be (I've done one before) but as is often said about childbirth, you tend to forget how painful it was until it happens again. The hell was not the difficulty of understanding the content, or any lack of interest in the subject – quite the contrary – but the agonizing choices that have to be made about how best to express the nuances of the original text. For as we all know, translation is not just about words. Translation is always driven by context, and in the case of a book in particular – especially one that is in any sense a literary work – the choices you make at the word level are driven by the sentence, the choices you make at the sentence level are governed by the paragraph, the choices within paragraphs are constrained by the context of the chapter, and although the chapter may end up being your working unit, final choices at the word level may not be ultimately settled until the whole book is complete. And in the case of a published author, all of the above will also be influenced by existing translations of their work or other writings. That's a lot to hold in your working memory, no matter how electronically enhanced.

The real agony is that the repeated revisions of the text resulting from these ever-widening circles of context are almost never-ending. Again, as we all know, there is no such thing as a perfect translation – whatever you come up with could always be better, or at least equally good in another version. In the end, it is really only the imposition of an arbitrary deadline by a third party that can bring the whole thing to an end. And how many people are ever going to know just how much blood, sweat and tears actually went into it? Apart from noting whether or not the finished translation appears polished and smooth, how many of us are really going to voluntarily embark on the busmen's holiday of reading someone else's translation as a parallel text just for the sheer fun of it? Not very many, I suspect.

How many people, for instance, have discovered quite how brilliant Michael Emmerich's translation work is? I'm sad enough to have made the effort – if only to a limited extent – simply because I happened to stumble on his fabulous translation of Mari Akasaka's acclaimed novel 'Vibrator' and was astonished at the clever puns in the English (it's the story of a woman having a psychotic breakdown in which she has schizophrenic conversations with herself that involve outrageous wordplay). The

particular passage that caught my attention was the internal dialogue that morphs "Gotta act your age" into "Gotta act your rage?", and I wondered how that could possibly reflect the original text. When I finally tracked a copy down I discovered that he'd been riffing on a pun in the Japanese between 「違うだって」 and 「血がうだってえ?」, and given the context, his translation is almost diabolically clever in terms of how well it reflects the mad mental meltdown of the protagonist. But I don't suppose it's been widely noted. Michael Emmerich deserves some sort of medal for that kind of work, but in fact he is likely to have received almost no public recognition, a mere pittance from the publisher, and done it mostly for the sheer love of it, albeit supported by an academic salary.

That's quite okay, of course, and he's lucky to be able to indulge his literary habit in this way. But for those of us working freelance who like to be able to feed ourselves on the proceeds of our work, the prospects are not so exciting. The harsh reality is that the amount of money available for translation work is almost in inverse proportion to the interest one might be likely to have in the subject matter. As usual, the money at the sharp end is in the dissemination of hard information – financial research, intellectual property in the biotech and telecommunications industries, and related litigation. All of which can be extremely challenging, and the need to carefully convey all the nuances of the original can be crucial to any court case in which the translation is produced as evidence. But it's generally stuff that will make your brain hurt rather than your heart dance. Any aspiring translator ought to be told this right at the outset to prevent the disappointment that will inevitably follow if you imagine you can make a living from literary translation.

Things may be a little better if you work out of English, to be sure – there is a much greater demand for translation outside of the English-speaking world simply by virtue of the global dominance of English and the need to keep up to speed with what's happening in that market. But by the same token, there is more competition because more people are interested and motivated to become translators. And even then, the potential royalties on a translation are low unless you find yourself with a real best seller on your hands, or have been smart – or bold – enough to snap up the translation rights (like the Japanese translator of the Harry Potter series, who eventually made so much money he was presented in 2006 with a 700 million yen tax bill on an estimated undeclared income of around 3.5 *billion* yen. My heart bleeds.)

So, who'd want to become a translator? Or, more importantly, what might you expect to gain from it? Fame and fortune are really not going to be on the menu. Even if you are lucky enough to translate something that is widely read, for the most part it will be the author of the book that gets the credit (and rightly so, of course). The translator rarely gets his or her name in lights, or even in print large enough to be noticed without

reading glasses. Fortune? Not likely either, for the reasons discussed. You can make a decent living if you focus on a particular speciality and have or are able to acquire some kind of technical background that allows you to tap into the seam of legally-driven translation work. Job security is not high on the list either. In-house translation work is rarely paid very well, and life as a freelancer can be precarious.

But still we do it. Is it just that, once you fall into it, it's too much work to retrain and do something else – a sort of "I've started so I'll finish" approach? Sometimes it can seem like that, but then, so can almost anything else. I'd like to think that it's more than that, despite all of the above. I'd like to think that whatever the lack of financial or other reward, there's still a satisfaction that comes from the work itself. Not just from the satisfaction of knowing that you can do it, though there is that. It is a real achievement to be able to translate, a difficult skill that offers the discipline of being both an art and a science in ways that few other professions do. But more than that, it's a work that is never done – no matter how good you think you are, there's always more to learn, a different way of thinking of the same thing, or a new context that forces you to come up with a more creative solution. And for me, that's the real thrill of translation. Despite my bitching about the book, it was at least a creatively mind-bending experience, and that's what we're all engaged in, as the exchanges that surface from time to time on the J-Net show. Whenever someone shares a problem, there's always an opportunity for some creative thinking. We may not always come up with the goods. But the challenge to do so is always interesting, and if you're lucky, may even force you to see things in a new light.

Beats watching daytime television, anyway – and as those of us old enough to have read the very first J-Net Bulletin in real time will be starting to reflect, perhaps it's also a useful way of keeping your brain active and staving off the inevitable deprivations of old age. After all, if recent reports are to be believed, there are now several independent studies which show that the onset of dementia in those who are bilingual is delayed on average by four years compared to their monolingual counterparts.

Now there's a cheerful note to end on...