

## Imagine Piece

### At the Edge of Translation

By Simon Prentis

THE BULLETIN OF THE JAPANESE NETWORK

In the summer of 2007, I was suddenly asked to supervise the translation of the phrase 'Imagine Peace' into 23 other languages for inscription onto the white glass tiles that cover the well wall surrounding the base of Yoko Ono's Imagine Peace Tower, an installation I was helping to project-manage in Iceland.

Just two words, I hear you say – a cushy little number, surely? If only. It didn't help, of course, that I don't have a working knowledge of most of the languages we selected, though that would have been a pretty big ask. But even so, I had greatly underestimated what was going to be involved, and the issues it would raise.

The first task was to whittle down the more than 6,000 possibilities to a short list of around thirty languages that Yoko could make a final selection from. Obviously, we wanted to make the choice as representative as possible, but it wasn't a question of just choosing the most widely spoken ones. For a start, there are different ways of calculating which

they might be. Do you limit your count to native speakers only, for example, or do you include people who employ a different tongue as a functioning second or third language? Numbers published by various international organisations are at best only an educated guess, although Unesco's dirty dozen (Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German and French) is probably uncontroversial enough. But my idea was that as well as speaking to as many people as possible, the choice should include a suitable selection of both the main different families of languages and those spoken by minority groups, while Yoko also wanted there to be a focus on languages used in war-torn countries. Another factor to consider was the visual: as the translations were being engraved, I thought it would be good to have a variety of different scripts as well, though that created another set of interrelationships and family groupings to consider. At one point I was quite keen on Akkadian, and even managed to persuade the curator of the Middle East



*Platform and base of the Imagine Peace Tower on Viðey Island, Reykjavik*

department at the British Museum to come up with a translation, but in the end it was decided to avoid dead languages, as apart from everything else, hardly anyone would be able to read them – and there are, of course, no native speakers available to verify the correctness of the translation.



*Shalman hussisa*  
Akkadian for Imagine Peace

So, the initial selection process was already a political and linguistic minefield that a committee would doubtless rapidly have come to grief over. Fortunately, as I was responsible for most of the research, I could put forward the candidates I felt were the most suitable, give my reasons, and leave the ultimate choice to someone else. In the end, the final selection was (in alphabetical order): Arabic, Chinese, English, Filipino, Finnish, French, Georgian, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Inuktitut, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Tamil, Tibetan and Turkish.

### Getting the Translations Done

But that was just the start of it. Now we had to get the translations done. My initial thought was to play it safe and go to both academics and diplomats, double-sourcing the translations with ‘official’ organisations and then getting them to cross-reference with each other as necessary to come up with an agreed text. What I hadn’t realised is that with the odd honourable exception, neither academics nor diplomats are very good with (as opposed to ‘at’) languages. The reasons are different – if the academics tend to be too cautious and technical, lacking a real feel for language, the diplomats tend to be too prosaic and political, and partisan in their judgments – but the result is the same: a lack of poetry.

At which point you’re probably thinking: “What poetry?” After all, it’s just the two words, not the entire lyrics of the song *Imagine* (though this had also been under consideration at one point). How much poetry can you cram into that? Well, it turns out that there’s

more to it than you might, er, imagine. To begin with, the phrase ‘*Imagine Peace*’ isn’t just a vague injunction to bring to mind an image in some abstract way – in the way you might do if I asked you to “*imagine white*”. It’s actually an invitation to actively consider how much better off the world will be once we finally realise that war is no longer an answer, and that our disputes are better decided without resorting to violence – as most of us living in stable democracies have learnt to do as a matter of course over the last two generations. More than an invitation, it’s really an instruction: *Imagine Peace*.

Added to which, as a phrase it’s probably fair to say that it’s not a particularly ‘natural’ piece of English. Amongst other things, it’s not immediately clear how exactly you are supposed to go about doing whatever imagining peace might entail. If the phrase was “*Imagine there was peace*”, or even “*Imagine a state of affairs where peace existed everywhere*” it might seem more natural – but then naturalness is not the point, here. It’s a slogan, a catchphrase, even a poetic invocation. And just to complicate things still further, it was coined by someone whose first language is not English – yet at the same time it turns out it’s not a very easy phrase to express concisely in her native Japanese either.

There were some surprising disagreements - even arguments - between translators of languages I had no previous knowledge of.

All of these considerations – and more – form the conceptual hinterland to the translation of those two simple words ‘*Imagine Peace*’, a sort of gravity field of nuance that had to be raised with and conveyed to each of the translators so that they could get a better sense of what they were aiming for. Even the more closely-related European languages contain subtle and unexpected (to me) pitfalls: there’s a huge difference in French, for example, between ‘*Imaginez paix*’ and ‘*Imaginez la paix*’, and whereas Spanish has ‘*Imagina la paz*’, the Portuguese is ‘*Imagine a paz*’. So by the time you get to Tibetan and Tamil (not to mention Inuktitut) things began to get quite complicated. There were some surprising

disagreements – even arguments – between translators of languages I had no previous knowledge of, and to resolve them I had to rely on the reactions of other native speakers as they interpreted the results, and judge whether they suggested the same overtones as the English.

### The Japanese Pitfall

A flavour of the difficulties involved can be seen by considering how best to translate the phrase into Japanese. I had been told that 「平和な世界を想像してごらん」 is the long-standing ‘official’ Japanese translation, which meant that a new translation was effectively off-limits for political reasons, but to my ear it remains far from ideal. I find it unsatisfactory on several counts, not least because it is way too long, and has a much more explanatory, exegetical tone than the sharp, stark quality of the English. ‘Imagine Peace’ is just two words, and four syllables. Even if it’s harder to parse Japanese that way, 「平和な世界を想像してごらん」 is still 13 characters, eleven syllables and/or 17音, which makes it prolix in the extreme – and regardless of what any client might say, at the very least that sort of conversion rate would be ruinous for a translator paid on a source count. And rhythmically, it’s all wrong

That comes into sharper focus if you consider the back-translation, which really can’t be anything much less than “Try imagining a peaceful world”, whichever way you slice it. That may be what ‘Imagine Peace’ means, at some level. But it’s not what it says, and to prescribe it in that way is to limit the interpretation. Call me picky, but it’s not asking you to try – it’s asking you to do it. And do we really need to be told that it’s a peaceful world that we’re thinking of? Peace is the point here, whether personal or global, and so even with the best of intentions, to gloss it in that way is not so much 「超訳」 as what might be called 「膨超訳」 …

There’s a cultural issue here, of course. I remember in my early years in Japan being amused by signs on platforms saying (as I recall) 「吸殻を拾いましょう」, whereas the equivalent in England – should one have ever existed – would never take such a cuddly, community-oriented approach, but would have unequivocally demanded that you ‘Pick up your butts’, always assuming it hadn’t peremptorily told you not drop them in the first place. In a similar vein I remember a client calling me once from a hotel wanting to know how you said 「まだですか」 in English,

as the food he’d ordered from room service half an hour previously still hadn’t arrived. I told him that while he could say something gentle like “Is my food on the way?”, a more effective cultural translation would be to loudly demand “Where’s my effin’ food?”

So, there’s an argument that the brusqueness of ‘Imagine Peace’ does not sit well in Japanese, which is the apparent rationale for 「平和な世界を想像してごらん」. To test that argument, though, you have to consider whether or not there are Japanese expressions that do manage to ask you to do things without being so effusive. And one example that quickly springs to mind, again from my early days in Japan, is the cry of 「火の用心」 that used to echo through my street in the evenings. Historically, it’s a reminder to be careful with your cooking and take precautions not to start a fire, but it’s an instruction nonetheless, even if it doesn’t take the form of one. It’s asking you to ‘prepare your heart’ to be aware of the danger of fire while you go about your business. Though completely different in context, I feel there should be something of that laconic quality to the Japanese translation of ‘Imagine Peace’.

It’s also interesting to note that although Yoko Ono will write ‘Imagine Peace’ on dedications or gifts to people that she writes in English, in Japanese she often tends to put 「夢を持とう」. Not that they are in any way equivalent in the literal sense, but it’s worth observing that “Let’s have a dream” is no more satisfactory as an English translation of that phrase than 「平和を想像して」 is of ‘Imagine Peace’. And yet, there is a synergy between them. 「意識」 though it may be, the real sense of 「夢を持とう」 is much closer to “Believe in yourself” or even perhaps, “Live your dream”. In that sense, I feel that 「平和を想おう」 (if not 「平和を想うこと」), or more simply 「平和な世界を」 is much closer to the spirit of ‘Imagine Peace’ than the politely over-constructed mouthful that is 「平和な世界を想像してごらん」.

### Different Expressions of the Same Concept

But then the English phrase ‘Imagine Peace’ is not really the original, of course. Though it may be the way it first came to be expressed, the idea existed as a concept before it was put into words, as is the case with all thoughts. In that sense the phrase ‘Imagine Peace’ is already a translation of the original thought – so rather than being tied to the idea of translating the English phrase ‘Imagine Peace’ into 23 other

languages, it is actually more helpful to think of the texts on the wall of the Peace Tower – including the English – as being 24 different expressions of the same concept. That’s a liberating thought, as it allows you to get away from the culture-specific nuances and unique valences that an utterance in any language embodies.

I realised that it was poets and artists I needed to reach out to for the best read on how to interpret the translations we were getting, and fine tune for nuance.

It’s interesting that several of the translators of the languages we worked with (especially in the Middle East) pointed out that in ‘their’ language, ‘Imagine Peace’ in the sense they understood it as being used was better translated as ‘Dream Peace’. Of course the word ‘dream’ has a double meaning in English as well – to ‘have a fantasy’ and to ‘have a vision’, and in the war-torn world of the Middle East, peace is much more of a dream in the latter sense than those of us living in more settled societies can ever imagine. For them, to merely imagine peace is far too abstract: there is an urgent need to dream of peace and to cling on to that dream.

In the end, though it might not have been the best place to start, I realised that it was poets and artists I needed to reach out to for the best read on how to interpret the translations we were getting, and fine tune for nuance. It turned out that, living in a polycultural community in North London, once I started to ask around I found that in most cases I was only a handshake or two away from someone suitable amongst my immediate circle of friends and acquaintances, so as the deadline approached (and I had been given only just under a month to get the whole thing together) things started to fall into place quite nicely.

### Then and Now

Although all this happened eight years ago, I was inspired to write it up after my most recent visit to

Iceland for the annual lighting of the Imagine Peace Tower, which takes place each year on October 9th, John Lennon’s birthday. When the moment comes there’s a simple ceremony, Yoko says a few words, and the lights (the beam is made up of fifteen high-power searchlights, six of which are reflected through prismatic mirrors) go on in sequence to the strains of Imagine. But it’s never as simple as it seems. Behind the scenes are several days of preparation as the lights are serviced and realigned, a process which usually involves Yoko’s Japanese agent and myself lying on our backs for hours in the freezing tundra with walkie-talkies, employing a strange cocktail of Japanese, English and pidgin Icelandic (and occasionally Italian – the searchlights are made and serviced by an Italian company) to guide the technicians who steer the fingers of light into an appropriate embrace against a backdrop of ghostly northern lights (if we’re lucky). This year went more smoothly than usual, and I had time to walk round and revisit the translations we’d had engraved on the well wall, and reflect on how such a seemingly straightforward task had thrown up all kinds of questions about language, translation and meaning.

Yoko has said that Lennon’s excuse for inviting her over to his house in Surrey on that fateful day in May 1968 was to ask her to build the house of light described in Grapefruit – her early book of ‘instructions’ – in his garden. She laughed it off at the time, telling him it was not something that could actually be made, but a thing that should simply be, you know, “imagined”? But now her ‘house of light’ has finally been built in Reykjavik, she feels as if Iceland itself has become John’s garden. As realised, though, her Imagine Peace Tower is not just some exotic piece of garden furniture dressed up as conceptual art. It has a serious purpose. By directing attention to the way we’d all like to be, if we could only bring ourselves to think it was possible – living actively at peace with our neighbours – it shines out as a beacon of hope for the whole of man- and woman-kind. It is also a standing rebuke to the members of the so-called international community, who still continue to sit on their hands while countless thousands die in the proxy wars being waged around us – despite us all being signed up to the provisions of the UN Charter, whose founding and only purpose is to maintain international peace and security.

But don’t let me get started on that...

## Photo Gallery

The Imagine Peace Tower in Iceland

Photos by Simon Prentis and Guðmundur Fylkisson (who took the good one)

THE BULLETIN OF THE JAPANESE NETWORK



Online gallery at <http://j-net.org.uk/gallery/index.php/>

For more information:

The 24 languages: <http://imaginepeacetower.com/24languages>

Visit Reykjavik: <http://visitreykjavik.is/imagine-peace-tower>

Viðey Island: <http://videy.com/en/>