

***Haiku* and the Japanese Language: How to Come to Terms with the Shortest Literary Form in the World**

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Abstract

Haiku is said to be the shortest poetic form in the world, and yet it has firmly established itself as one of the major literary genres in Japan and its popularity is now spreading over the world. The present paper addresses the paradox of *haiku* poetry, which is so short and yet can be so functional at the same time. It starts by checking how one and the same original *haiku* piece in Japanese can be translated in widely divergent ways in western languages – which incidentally reminds us of a remark by Roland Barthes, who characterizes *haiku* as having ‘an empty center’ (i.e. semantically indeterminate, thus inviting any reader to come to it with any meaning he/she favours, without ever being assured that the interpretation offered by him/her is the absolutely correct one). The paper proceeds to show that *haiku*’s functionality is supported by the characteristic stance of Japanese speakers in their daily use of language as a means of communication, namely ready empathy, ‘reader-responsibility’ (Hinds 1987: active self-involvement in interpretive work on the part of the reader) and the ‘subject-object merger’ type of construal.

Keywords: *haiku*, translation, empathy, reader-responsibility, subject-object merger

1. A paradox about Japanese *haiku* poetry is that it is alleged to be the shortest poetic form in the world and yet it can function as a piece of artistic work. Thus reactions to one and the same *haiku* poem may vary, not only between individual readers who are native speakers of Japanese but also between people of different cultures – sometimes in drastically different ways. Let me give an example. Example (1) below is one of the most celebrated pieces of *haiku* in Japan, a piece by Basho (1644-1694), probably the best-known *haiku* master in the country. It is given here together with a word-for-word gloss and a literal translation in English. This is followed by its four English translations, (1a) by D.Keene, (1b) by E. Seidensticker, (1c) by W. J. Porter, and (1d) by W. J. Page, all of whom were university professors of either Japanese or comparative literature in the U.S. at the time of translation.

(1) Furu ike ya kawadzu tobikomu midzuno oto.
Old pond discourse particle frog jump-in water’s sound
(literally, OLD POND FROG JUMPING IN SOUND OF WATER)

(1a) The ancient pond
A frog leaps in
The sound of the water.

(1b) The quiet pond
A frog leaps in,
The sound of the water.

(1c) Into the calm old lake

A frog with flying leap goes plop!

The peaceful hush to break.

(1d) A lonely pond in age-old stillness sleeps ...

Apart, unstirred by sound or motion ... till

Suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps.

One hears from time to time from Japanese professors who lecture on Japanese literature in the U.S. that on being presented with English translations like (1a) and (1b) above, American students typically react by responding with questions like “So what?” and “What of it?” They simply can’t understand the point of the original work. On the other hand, if Japanese students are presented with English translation like (1c) and (1d) above, they will probably respond by saying, “These are mere paraphrases and are not translations at all!” All the four translations are judged to be either saying too little or saying too much.

2. Before proceeding to discuss our major problem of *haiku* paradox, we have to consider and keep in mind certain specific linguistic problems necessarily involved in rendering a piece of text in one language into another language. The first phrase in Basho’s acclaimed piece quoted in (1) above is *furu ike*, glossed as ‘old pond’. Any native speaker of Japanese who also knows English will agree that ‘old pond’ is the closest literal rendering in English of the original Japanese phrase, *furu ike*. But look at translations (1a) and (1b) given above --- translations, incidentally, by two of the best-known American Japanologists. Neither of them opts for using the word ‘old’ in their translations. What they offer actually are the words, ‘ancient’ and ‘quiet’, both of which are semantically totally distinct from ‘old’. What are the possible reasons for their diversions? The translators’ motivation for using semantically diverging words will presumably be that the English phrase ‘old pond’ could evoke a very different image from the original Japanese phrase, *furu ike*. How different could it be? According to a reviewer (who is a native speaker of English) of a book on *haiku* in English (Sato 1983), “Old pond’ in English might suggest a stinking body of water, black, weedy and stagnant, ...’ (quoted in Sato 1987). Such an image being imposed on the acclaimed masterpiece, everybody will agree, would simply be a disaster. The avoidance of the use of the adjective ‘old’ can be accounted for in this way. But what can we say about the adjectives ‘ancient’ and ‘quiet’ actually chosen instead by the translators of (1a) and (1b)? The translator’s motivation for opting for ‘quiet’ rather than ‘old’ in (1b) is transparent enough. The translator assumed that the original poet’s intention was to contrast the features of motion and sound of the frog jumping into the water with the state of rest and silence associated with the pond. The translator’s motivation for opting for ‘ancient’ rather than ‘old’ in (1a) is a bit more delicate. Personally, I remember an occasion on which I encountered the expression ‘ancient pond’. I was staying in an elegant hotel in Hawaii. On the beach adjacent to the hotel building was a pool built in the style of the age of King Kamehameha (who reigned over the Hawaiian Islands between 1810-1819). In the handbook on the hotel this pool was described as an ‘ancient pond’. The adjective ‘ancient’ in translation (1a) is thus meant to imply something like ‘reminiscent of the noble past times’, thus excluding any uncomplimentary connotations.

Notice next that the phrase *furu ike* (‘old pond’) is followed by the agglutinating particle *ya*. This particle is in fact very frequently used in the text of a *haiku* poem, especially at the end of the initial phrase (as in the present case). In the English translation, it is rendered as a semicolon, a colon or an exclamation mark, as the case may be or simply ignored. Actually however, it functionally plays an important role in *haiku* rhetoric. The indigenous technical term for it is ‘kireji’ (literally, ‘cutting word’), its function being ‘to cut the flow of the text’. Notice that its rhetorical function is highly paradoxical: it is meant to cut the flow of

the text, in order, however, not to destroy the cohesion of the text, but rather to bring to the fore the contrast between the two parts of the text separated by it. Thus in our present example, the cutting word *ya* separates the first phrase ('old pond') from the second and third phrases ('frog jumping in ... sound of water'). By being separated, the emergent two portions of the text are now found standing in clear contrast to each other in terms of 'static' vs. 'dynamic' and 'silence' vs. 'sound'.

Next comes the word *kawadzu*, an old word for *kaeru* ('frog') in modern Japanese. Now Japanese nouns (including nouns referring to concrete, countable entities) do not morphologically distinguish between singular and plural. There are a couple of suffixes that are agglutinated to nouns to show plurality but their use is only optional. In most cases, the singularity-plurality distinction is judged by referring to the context. This means that the word *kawadzu*, as it stands in the particular *haiku* poem we are now considering, can be interpreted either as singular or plural. In fact, we have English translations which have 'a frog', on the one hand, and those which have 'frogs', on the other hand.

A survey (quoted by Sato (1983)) reveals that out of the one hundred English translations (both by native speakers of Japanese who know English and by non-native speakers of Japanese who know Japanese) of the *haiku* piece in question, ninety-eight render *kawadzu* in the singular and only two in the plural. The result agrees with the intuition of the native speakers, to whom the image evoked by the piece usually contains only a single frog, the reason for their choice of a single frog being that the point about the piece in question is 'the silence suddenly broken by a sound'. Extremely intriguing, however, is the fact that of the two English translations with the plural form, 'frogs', one is a translation by Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a cosmopolitan writer of Irish-Greek descent, who came to Japan in 1891 and chose to be naturalized as a Japanese citizen. Hearn is acclaimed as a person who had a deep understanding of Japanese culture and it is sometimes considered puzzling that a person like Hearn should have opted for the image of frogs rather than a single frog. Some critics suggest that this is exactly the scene of the garden Hearn himself used to witness from the room of the house where he was staying. A linguistically more plausible interpretation, however, will be that the plural form here refers to the number of times rather than to the number of entities. In other words, it may well be that what was actually witnessed was a repetition with some pause in between, of a frog jumping rather than a number of frogs jumping all at one time. It is interesting to note that in the written record describing the scene at which the *haiku* piece in question was created, we read 'the sound of FROG jumping into the water was sometimes [literally, not often] heard'. After the question about the number of FROG, the translators are encountered by the question of what verb to choose to describe the motion of the frog(s). The statistics quoted in Sato (1987) give 60% for *jump*, 20% for *leap*, 12.6% for *plunge* and 7.4% for others. One can say that of the three most frequently chosen verbs, *jump* connotes dynamism, *leap* suggests elegance, and *plunge* is associated with suddenness, while specifying that the movement is into water. The Japanese verb, *tobikomu* is rather neutral when contrasted with any of the three English verbs cited. Any of the three can be well accommodated here.

The final phrase of the *haiku* piece in question is *midzu no oto* (literally, 'water's sound'). One alternative offered here to the translator is to use an onomatopoeic word (e.g. *plop* as in (1c)). It can be pointed out, however, that the use of onomatopoeic words is not common in *haiku*, except when the poet invents and uses a new short form for a new effect not covered by the already existing onomatopoeic words. One reason for the paucity of onomatopoeic words in *haiku* poetry is that the poetic form is too short to indulge in the luxury. A more real reason, however, will be – and this is one of the central points I am going to discuss in the latter half of my talk – that the *haiku* poem presupposes no one-and-only-one 'correct'

interpretation and that it rather is ready to lend itself to any number and any kind of interpretation that the reader may want to offer, so that anyone can appreciate it and enjoy it in his or her own way. It is like a socially open forum in which anyone can participate with his or her own ideology intact. Using onomatopoeic words with socially encoded meanings (like 'plop') will certainly go against this essence of *haiku* poetry. Simple descriptive statements like 'the sound of the water' will accommodate any reader as a possible creator of new meanings out of familiar images.

3. A quick review of the rich semantic potentials encoded in the 'masterpiece' by Basho will remind us of the notion of 'ambiguity', such as the one advocated by William Empson, an English critic who defines 'ambiguity' as 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (Empson 1956:1) Empson's definition of ambiguity does appear to be well applicable to the poetical essence of *haiku* poetry I have been talking about here. There is, however, a crucial difference to be noted. In the case of Empson, 'ambiguity' is primarily conceived of as something tactically encoded in the text by the author, which the reader is supposed to detect and appreciate. The interpretive process described by Empson gives us an impression of a work by an acute critic, who closely analyzes the text and brings to light the hidden treasures of meaning. The text of *haiku* poetry does not require of its readers anything so special and technical. Rather it welcomes and invites its readers to read themselves into the text. Notice a paradox here. It is ready to accept any interpretation, however private; it accommodates just anything, while it remains unchanged, always ready to accommodate. In other words, it is 'empty'.

Roland Barthes, the well-known French critic, who visited Japan briefly in the 1960's, saw 'emptiness' in a number of aspects of Japanese culture. *Haiku* poetry was found no exception and he offered the following comments in his book on Japan, *Empire of Signs*:

... While being quite intelligible, the haiku means nothing and it is by this double condition that it seems open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way – the way of a polite host who lets you make yourself at home with all your preferences, your values, your symbols intact; the haiku's "absence" (we say as much of a distracted mind as of a landlord off on a journey) suggests subordination, a breach, in short the major covetousness of meaning.

Barthes, in the passage quoted above, would have better talked about 'a polite hostess' rather than 'a polite host'. The image of the former would perhaps have agreed with Japanese sensibilities more than that of the latter. In any case, Barthes insightfully and beautifully accounted for an aspect of the 'paradox' of *haiku* poetry.

4. We could, however, go a step still further and try to account for the 'paradox' in terms of the characteristic linguistic and psychological stances taken by the speakers of Japanese in their daily communication. Here I would like to introduce you to a 'typology' proposed by John Hinds, an American Japanologist. The following quotation is from his paper in 1987:

In this paper, I suggest a typology that is based on speaker and/or writer responsibility as opposed to listener and/or reader responsibility. What this means is that in some languages, such as English, the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the speaker, while in other languages, such as Japanese, the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the listener English speakers, by and large, charge the writer, or

speaker, with the responsibility to make clear and well-organized statements

In Japan, perhaps in Korea, and certainly in Ancient China, there is a different way of looking at the communication process. In Japan, it is the responsibility of the listener (or reader) to understand what it is that the speaker or author had intended to say.

Thus if there is a failure in communication, the responsibility is to be attributed to the speaker in one culture and to the listener in another culture. Hinds offers the following anecdote to illustrate the point:

An American woman was taking a taxi to the Ginza Tokyu Hotel [in Tokyo]. The taxi driver mistakenly took her to the Ginza Daiichi Hotel. She said, "I'm sorry, I should have spoken more clearly." This, I take to be an indication of her speaker-responsible upbringing. The taxi driver demonstrated his listener-responsible background when he replied, "No, no, I should have listened more carefully".

There can be individual and circumstantial differences, of course, but I think I can accept Hinds' characterization as a general statement. What I want to emphasize in this connection is that *haiku* poetry is a literary genre which presupposes the 'reader-responsibility' stance on the part of its readers. On reading the piece on the frog(s) by Basho, which we have been discussing, the typical Japanese reader will undergo an interpretive process (if I may say so) like the following: 'OLD POND – FROG JUMPING IN – SOUND OF WATER ... this is what our *haiku* master witnessed – what did he feel or what was he thinking about when he was watching the scene? – suppose I were now sitting beside him, watching the same scene – how would I feel? – would I feel in the same way as the great master? – would what I feel be the same as, or different from, what our master had in mind? – if different, how different would it be and why?' and so forth. What at first was a collection of bits of fragmentary information could in this way be elaborated and expanded infinitely by reading one's own thoughts into it. Without such positive engagement on the part of the reader, the *haiku* piece remains insignificant, eliciting no more response than 'So what?'

The stance of 'reader-responsibility' in linguistic communication is naturally to be supported by positive mental readiness for empathy. You project yourself into the author, be at one with the author, first trying to re-experience what the author (is supposed to have) experienced. All this while, however, you reserve your own possibilities --- possibilities to diverge from, and even to go beyond, the author.

5. One further point I would like to discuss in relation to the interpretation of *haiku* pieces is the preference between the two contrasting stances called 'subject-object opposition' and 'subject-object merger' – two notions which are often referred to in the traditions of Asian philosophy. A poetically phrased account of the two notions from the viewpoint of the author being engaged in literary production is found in an essay published in 1924 by Yasunari KAWABATA (1899-1972), the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968:

There are only three ways of seeing the lily ...: Am I within the lily? Is the lily within me? Or do the lily and I exist independently of each other? ... If I describe the lily and myself as though they existed independently of each other, that would be to use a naturalistic style of writing. That represents the old principle of objectivity. We could say that this is the principle that has determined every form of literary expression to this day. However, the power residing within the subject is no longer content with this. I am within the lily. The lily is within me. These two are ultimately indistinct. The fundamental aim of neo-subjectivist approach is to express things through just such feelings.

The situation described here is something like the following: “Freezing cold, the poet and the crow(s) being wrapped up alike in thick fog. Then a crow’s cry – heard from the depth of the fog.” Notice that in the German version the poet addresses the crows. The poet wants to empathize (and by emphasizing, to be at one) with the crows. This, however, ironically shows that the poet and the crows exist separately – they stand in opposition to each other. In the revised Japanese version, however, we have no opposition between the poet as subject and the crows as object. The poet and the crows are wrapped up alike in one and the same thick fog; being dissolved, as it were, they are no longer opposed to each other. Notice also that in the Japanese version, the first person pronoun, which in the German version, specifically refers to the poet himself, is removed. To say ‘I’ is intended to say actually ‘I, and none other than I’, implying that the speaker wants to contrast himself with someone else. You will notice that the first person pronoun rarely occurs in the *haiku* text. This is because what is described in the *haiku* text is something that the poet himself experiences or experienced. This, in fact, is supposed to be presupposed by the reader. In other words, the reader of *haiku* is supposed to presuppose the *invisible presence of the author* in the text. This explains why the Japanese reader senses something like *haiku* in a poem like the one shown below – a piece of ‘imagist’ poetry by William Allingham (1824 – 89) an Irish poet (especially without the last three lines):

(4) Four ducks on the pond,
A grass-bank beyond,
A blue sky of spring,
White clouds on the wing;
What a little thing
To remember for years –
To remember with tears.

Notice that the invisibility of the poet in the text helps the reader to empathize (and by empathizing, to be at one) with the author.

6. Let me conclude my talk by pointing out that *haiku* certainly has some features which appear to be specific to Japanese culture naturally because it has evolved in a specific culture called Japanese culture, but that those features are by no means something to be monopolized by one specific culture alone. We all as humans must have a potentially common range of sensibilities. By activating our whole range of sensibilities, we will certainly be able to come to a stage at which what at first appeared to be alien about other cultures can be understood and appreciated as natural. It will even be possible that certain features of originally one particular culture may evolve in time in ways not at all envisaged by the indigenous members of the culture in question.

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