

Translation studies as cultural history

—The curious case of Dr. Seuss—

ANGLES, Jeffrey
Western Michigan University

Abstract

By looking at historical examples of translation, teachers are able to supplement current classroom practices, providing a rich, new window into the target culture. As a case study, this article examines what one can discover about Japanese culture through the examining Japanese translations of one of America's most famous children's writers, Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as 'Dr. Seuss.' One finds that a discussion of translation choices quickly opens into a larger discussion of ideological currents shaping Japanese history and culture. For instance, Ōmori Takeo's Japanese version of *The 500 hats of Bartholemew Cubbins*, published in 1949, gave Seuss's liberal, anti-imperialist story a special resonance for readers during the SCAP-lead Occupation-era rebuilding of Japan. The most recent wave of Seuss translations has been spearheaded by the feminist poet Itō Hiromi, whose choice of language mobilized Seuss in a liberatory agenda to reject gender bias. In each case, the translator's role goes far beyond simply replacing words; translation is a reflection of a much larger historical drama can teach students a great deal about Japanese cultural history.

Keywords: translation, culture, adaptation, literature, history

1 Introduction

It is common to think of translation as a process of word and phrase-level substitution; however, as numerous scholars have argued, there are always many more factors at work shaping a translation than casual observers might notice at first glance. Just as there are numerous cultural factors at work that shape the inception of a text in its original language, so too there are always numerous cultural factors at work in shaping ways that a translation takes form. If anything, a translation is just as much a product of the original culture as the culture that translated it. For instance, it is common for a Japanese reader who reads an American story in Japanese translation to view the text as a window into American culture and the world of the original author. In reality, however, it is easy to overlook the fact that the translation provides just as much information about the Japanese translator and Japanese culture as well.

As a result, Lawrence Venuti argues in *The scandals of translation* that when one reads literature in translation, it is important to have a 'double focus, encompassing not just the [original] foreign text and culture, but the text and culture of translation' (1998, p. 93). Translators choose particular books for translation because they feel it will appeal to specific needs within their own culture, and so in many ways, the question of when certain books were translated can reveal a great deal about the target society. If one looks more closely at the translated texts themselves, one finds that translators are always working to reconfigure the cultural information in the original text in ways that would be understandable and relevant to the target culture. By examining those particular negotiations, one can

learn a great deal about the translator's attitude toward the ideas present in the original work, as well as the culture producing the translation.¹

2 The curious case of Dr. Seuss

Much of this might sound quite abstract so far, but these are some of major themes that surfaced when during a translation seminar at Western Michigan University, I brought a group of Japanese translations of one of America's most iconic children's authors to share with my intermediate-level Japanese-language students. In order to get a better sense of what happens to a book in translation, my students had expressed interest in comparing the English version of a text with its Japanese version, so I selected a handful of picture books by one of America's most frequently read children's authors, Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904-1991), hoping that the Japanese would be easy enough for them to read. The choice was a strategic one, designed to capture students' interest since almost all American students are familiar with his work. Geisel is best known to American audiences by his pen name 'Dr. Seuss,' and his wildly imaginative children's books, written in witty verse and illustrated with his own distinctive, cartoonish drawings, are among the most popular in all of publishing history. All in all, over 200 million copies of his books have sold, and in 2001, *Publishers weekly* listed fourteen of his books among the top one hundred all-time bestselling hardcover children's books in America (Pease 2010, p. ix).

One of the reasons for this popularity is that Seuss's books strongly reflect values that American society holds dear. Many critics have showed how Seuss advocates brotherliness, equality, compassion, outspokenness, an adventuresome spirit, and other values that contribute to a healthy democratic environment. There have been several waves of Japanese translations of Dr. Seuss, but as I discovered in talking about him with my students, these Japanese translations did not merely slavishly imitate the larger ideological messages present in the original. If anything, we found that historical factors and cultural currents in Japan have consistently shaped which books were translated and how. Translations of his work have reflected larger currents in Japanese society, both in terms of text choice and translation style, and they provide a small but revealing window into Japanese cultural history. For the sake of brevity, this article will only briefly discuss two Seuss translations, but in doing so, it will demonstrate some of the ways one might read a translation with students as a reflection of the translation's own historical moment and thus a gateway into cultural history.²

2.1 Ōmori Takeo and *The 500 hats of Bartholemew Cubbins*

The first Japanese translation of Dr. Seuss was published in 1949, just a few years after the end of World War II, when Japan was busily rebuilding. It was during this era of tumultuous change that a translator named Ōmori Takeo translated *The 500 hats of Bartholemew Cubbins* into Japanese, thus introducing Dr. Seuss to the Japanese public for the first time.

When the original English was published in November 1938, Nazi Germany had just annexed Austria and the Sudetenland. Although Seuss does not refer to any leader specifically, one can read this book as a general illustration of the dramatic excesses of single-person rule, and may well reflect Seuss's own thoughts about the arrogance of Hitler. The book describes what happens when an ordinary boy happens upon a procession of the arrogant King Derwin (Seuss 1991, pp. 44–91). The

king's men order everyone in the streets to remove their hats, but when Bartholomew does, to his own surprise, it reveals a second hat underneath. The king bellows at Bartholomew for failing to remove his hat, but each time the boy tries to remove it, he finds another underneath. The king arrests him and orders Bartholomew to be executed, but the laws do not permit a person to be executed unless his hat is removed, and since they cannot take all the hats off, the boy narrowly escapes death. Eventually, as the hats come off, they grow grand and covered with jewels, and the king's irritation turns to envy. In the end, the king offers 500 pieces of gold for the innermost hat, and Bartholomew returns happily home, much richer than before.

In 1949, just four years after the end of World War II, Ōmori published his translation *Fushigi na 500 no bōshi*. In many ways, it is a remarkable translation, capturing the essentials of the story and replicating the even the rhythmic, eccentric language of Scuss's original. What is perhaps more remarkable than the style of the translation, however, is the simple fact that such a message about the dangerously arbitrary nature of monarchy was being published at all. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the entire Japanese state had been organized around the emperor, who was seen as the head of the Japanese people, nation, state, and Shintō religion. As censorship grew stricter in the 1930s and the propaganda machine slipped into full gear, this message only grew stronger, and public documents such as the 1941 *Shinmin no michi* (The way of the subject) denounced any attempt to challenge the emperor's authority. After Pearl Harbor, there was no room for dissent, and any voices that attempted to question or criticize the emperor were guilty of *lèse majesté* and subject to severe censorship, imprisonment, and punishment.

With the end of the war in 1945, however, the disillusioned and defeated population began to reject this image of the emperor. As historian John Dower has noted, the 'true sentiment' of the Japanese toward the crown revealed itself to be 'closer to mild attachment, resignation, even indifference where the imperial system and the vaunted national polity were concerned' (1999, pp. 302–03). Meanwhile, the Occupation government worked to install a new view of the Japanese monarchy, still retaining him as at a position as head of the nation, but disassociating the imperial office from religion and from the intimate workings of politics. Is this postwar reformulation, the emperor became a more 'human' figure—an ordinary person who was not always necessarily correct.

The point is that a book like *The 500 hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, which points out the follies and fallibility nature of monarchic government, especially when concentrated in the hands of a single individual, would never have seen the light of day in the early 1940s, when the emperor represented the head of the government, army, religion, and national polity. By 1949, however, the situation had changed radically, and Japan was ready for—and in fact, had already started constructing—a new vision of monarchy that relied not on superiority but on an understanding of the mutually beneficial relationship between people and the throne. Although *The 500 hats* begins with a sovereign that is high and mighty, by the end of the story, the relationship between the ruler and his people has shifted significantly. King Derwin adopts a more humble attitude and buys Bartholomew's jewel-encrusted hat, thus choosing to exchange his own crown for a symbol that comes from the general populace. The story seems to show a tacit recognition that an imperial crown derived from the people is more desirable, if not more significant than a one that is treated as existing *a priori* and maintained through force. Even though this story does not refer explicitly to any particular figure, when translated into Japanese soon after the reformulation of the emperor's position, the book takes on an unmistakable

political dimension and fits neatly with the SCAP government's democratic agenda. Although *The 500 hats* is one of Seuss's lesser known books in America, it has remained relatively popular in Japan, no doubt because of its strong advocacy of democratic values and its timing as one of the first wave of children's books to be translated in the immediate postwar era.

2.2 Itō Hiromi and *Oh, the places you'll go!*

A second wave of Dr. Seuss translations came during the 1960s and 1970s when the prolific translator Watanabe Shigeo, one of the key figures in the history of children's literature in Japan, translated eleven of Seuss's stories, beginning with a retranslation of *The 500 hats*. Another of Seuss's later translators, the feminist poet Itō Hiromi (about whom more will be said shortly), has commented that she found Watanabe's translations to be distasteful in that they consistently 'masculinise' the characters, using masculine pronouns like *boku* to make it clear that the narrators are boys, even in situations when they might not necessarily even be human or have any obvious markers of gender. Picture books, Itō complained, too often portray an all-male world, leaving young female readers with few characters with whom they might identify (personal communication, 23 Feb 2012). In fact, many of Seuss's protagonists are male, so one might argue that male-centeredness is a problem latent in Seuss's literature as a whole (Nel 2004, pp. 115-17). In any case, what is important for the purposes of this article is the fact that the consistent and largely unnecessary use of the masculine pronoun in Watanabe's translation constantly reminds readers of the character's gender, which has important implications for the ways young boys and girls relate to the text.

In the 1990s, Seuss underwent a third wave of translations into Japanese, partly inspired by the release of the Hollywood film adaptation of the *The Grinch who stole Christmas*. Among the translators who contributed to this wave of translations was Itō Hiromi, one of Japan's best-known poets. Born in 1955 in Tokyo, Itō had risen to prominence in the 1980s for a series of dramatic collections of poetry that described sexuality, pregnancy, and feminine erotic desire in dramatically direct language. From her earliest work, Itō had embarked on a lifelong battle against the stylized, artful, and understated language often seen in twentieth-century Japanese poetry. (See Itō 2009.) Much of her poetry is narrated in extended passages of relatively colloquial text, but at the same time, she carefully embeds strong rhythms, repeated cadences, and alliteration that make her work come alive when recited aloud. In the 1990s, Itō divorced her husband in Japan and moved with her two daughters to southern California, where she started a new life and gave birth to a third daughter. While raising her, Itō looked for books she could enjoy with her. It was then that she encountered Seuss's famous *The cat in the hat*. Thanks to her extensive experience as a poet working with narrative, voice, and rhythm, Itō was unusually well equipped to start translating Seuss, whose charm relies so much on meter, rhyme, and repetition.

After translating *The cat in the hat*, Itō moved on to another of Seuss's most famous books: *Oh, the places you'll go!* (1990). Written after Seuss's diagnosis of cancer, this was the last book that he published before his death in 1991. It comes in the form of a narration delivered by an older, more experienced narrator who speaks to a younger reader, telling him or her about the great places one can go in life. One might encounter problems, slumps, confusion, long waits, loneliness, and enemies, but it is possible to extract oneself from those and achieve success. The book quickly became a publishing phenomenon, rising to *The New York Times* adult bestseller list and staying there for more

than two years, selling over one and half million copies (Morgan and Morgan 1995, p. 283). With its valedictory message, the book crossed over to an adult book market, becoming a popular gift for high school and college graduates (Pease 2010, pp. 150-51).

Although Itō has commented that she found *Oh, the places you'll go!* to be 'nice', but she was disturbed by the fact that it seemed to be a book of advice specifically for boys (Itō 2012). The character Seuss has drawn for the illustrations is clearly a young boy, and in several places, the language indicates Seuss was speaking primarily to 'guys.' Just to give one of several such instances, Seuss writes early on in the book, 'You're on your own. And you know what you know. / And *YOU* are the guy who'll decide where to go.' Irked by passages such as this which implied that the book was speaking mainly to boys, Itō followed her feminist instincts and rendered them in more gender-neutral language: '*Nanishiro kimi wa, shitte ru koto wa nandemo shitte ru. / Sono ue, yuku michi wa jibun de kimeru taipu demo aru*' (in any case, as for the things you know, you know them all. / Moreover, you are the type to decide on your own the paths you will take).

This was not the only place where Itō decided to subvert the gender implications present in the original text. On the final page of the book, where Seuss writes, 'So... / be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray / or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea, / you're off to Great Places!' Itō has rendered the names in katakana transliteration, but in doing so, she has used two different suffixes at the end of the names: *Bakusubaumu-san*, *Bikusubī-san*, *burei-kun*, and *Morudekai-ari-ban-aren-oshei-kun*. Whereas the suffix *-kun* can only be attached to the name of a young male, the suffix *-san* can be attached to the name of either a male or a female. Itō (2012) has commented that she did this purposefully so that it did not look like the book was only speaking to a male audience.

As a feminist writer who is deeply sensitive to language, Itō recognized how problematic it was that Seuss's book, full of positive advice and encouragement, seemed to be talking exclusively to boys. As a result, she made the conscious decision to subvert the text, translating it in a way that carefully opened a space for readers of all genders could identify with the text. In her opinion, creating a new, gender-free message that suggests that girls can get ahead, just like boys, seemed entirely appropriate for Japan at the end of the twentieth century. Women have long had legal parity to men under the law, but even now, there continue to be real problems with women achieving parity in the workplace, politics, and society. For this reason, it was important for Itō, who desires equal opportunities for both genders, to encourage young women to dream big dreams and work hard to achieve them. Only with such encouragement, she believes, could women take their rightful place alongside men in the early twenty-first century.

As this case shows, translation is not merely a passive activity in which a translator uncritically reflects the ideas present in the original text. Translation can involve activism and can serve as a critical comment on a particular moment in culture. Once again, the translated text has much to reveal about the moment and ideology underlying its own creation.

3 Conclusion

When scholars look at literary texts as cultural artefacts, hoping to learn more about the intellectual struggles and psychological tendencies that took place in a particular time and place, there is a natural tendency to privilege texts produced by authors living and working in that culture.

Texts translated from other languages are much less likely to attract attention. Still, as this article suggests, translated texts can also provide a window into the values and intellectual struggles taking place within the target culture. People like Ōmori Takeo have frequently used translation as a means to import ideas from abroad to help shape their own particular culture, whereas slightly more subversive translators like Itō Hiromi have used translation as a means to modify the kinds of messages that are being produced within their own society. In short, translated texts are critical forums that help a civilization work out its own conflicts and to establish its own values. As a result when we bring examples of translations into our classrooms to share with students, we have the opportunity not only to teach them about the process of translation, but to help them think about the ways that translators and their choices are always situated with a specific and ever-changing culture and about how history is always subtly reflected in the lines of a text.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed version of this argument, see my two articles (2010 and 2012) published in Japanese and listed in the references below.

² For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see Angles 2014, which provides a broader discussion of Dr. Seuss's life, his close personal involvement with Japan, and the ways that Japanese translators have rendered his work into Japanese.

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