

論文

Translating to the Music: Problems and Possibilities in Song Lyric Translation

音楽翻訳: 歌詞の翻訳における問題と可能性

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国際関係学科

Edgar W. Pope

A distinct area of translation practice that involves musical as well as linguistic considerations is the translation of song lyrics. This paper will identify some of the problems and possibilities that confront song lyric translators, and illustrate these with examples of English-language popular songs that have been translated into Japanese and recorded in Japan.

Translation / Substitution of Lyrics: a form of glocalization

A translated song, i.e. one in which new words in a target language are set to the melody of a song originally composed in a different language, must be comprehensible and appealing as an integrated verbal/musical work in the target culture. As a result lyric translators rarely aim at “literal” translation, since this would often result in a song that is difficult to sing or comprehend, or one that is simply unattractive. The art of song translation is therefore generally an art of “loose” translation, and is carried out on a continuum between *translation* (new words with approximately the same meaning as the original words) and *substitution* (new words with new meaning).

Song translation (in the broad sense of translation / substitution) may be nearly as old as singing itself. But in the modern world it has often appeared as a form of glocalization: the adaptation of globally distributed products to local markets and cultures, for commercial, artistic, educational or other purposes. Glocalized songs have contributed to the globalization of musical styles, as when the Scottish folk song “Auld Lang Syne” was published with Japanese lyrics as “Hotaru no Hikari” (1881) and used as part of a curriculum to introduce European music to Japanese schoolchildren. More recently, song glocalizations have often employed musical styles that are already global, as when the Disney song “Let It Go” became familiar to Japanese listeners as “Ari no Mama de” (2013). The songs to be considered here are all 20th century glocalizations of English-language commercial popular songs.

Problems in Song Lyric Translation

The problems confronted by lyric translators can be roughly divided into those relating primarily to sound and those relating primarily to meaning.

Problems of sound: how to “fit” words to music

1) Tonal pattern: in tonal languages, the relationship between the melody of a song and the tonal pattern of its lyrics can be a problem. Although research shows that melody and word tone do not necessarily have to coincide, insufficient attention to word tone, for example by a lyric translator who is not fluent in the target language, can result in a strange or even incomprehensible song.

2) Stress pattern: patterns of verbal stress in the lyrics must either coincide with or aesthetically complement patterns of melodic or rhythmic emphasis. This is especially important in languages such as English that have strong contrasts between stressed and unstressed syllables. Thus the stressed one-syllable word “go” in the song “Let It Go” receives strong melodic emphasis; if the melodic emphasis fell instead on the word “it,” the effect would be very strange and unpleasant indeed.

3) Syllable count: some languages tend to require more syllables than other languages to express the same content. This is in fact the main problem in translating English lyrics into Japanese: if one translates strictly with regard to meaning, the number of syllables generally increases, but the new lyrics must still fit the same melody. Thus compromises become necessary in the realm of meaning, i.e. the translator must move along the continuum in the direction of loose translation or substitution. We can note, however, that the need to move toward loose translation / substitution is not only a problem to be solved, but also an opportunity to explore new creative possibilities.

Problems of meaning: the translation – substitution continuum (訳詞 — 作詞)

1) Level of “literality”: the translator must decide how strictly to adhere to the meaning of the original lyrics. A looser translation or substitution may be required in order to solve problems of sound, such as those described above.

2) Level of detail: the translator may need to add or subtract details from the content of the original lyrics. In translating from English to Japanese, for example, details may be eliminated in order to reduce the number of syllables in the translated lyrics.

3) Word play: word plays in the original lyrics, such as puns or rhymes that depend upon sounds of words in the source language, may be difficult or impossible to translate. Translators may, however, devise new word plays in the target language to create similar effects.

4) Repetition: the translator must decide to what extent repetition of phrases in the original lyrics should be reproduced in the translation. Eliminating repetition is one way to control syllable count when translating from English to Japanese. (Thus the Japanese version of “Let it go” dispenses with the repetition of that phrase, replacing the six syllable phrase “Let it go, let it go...” with “Ari no mama no....”)

As examples of creative solutions to these translation problems, we will look at two songs composed in New York City in the 1920s that were subsequently translated into Japanese.

Examples: Two “Tin Pan Alley” Songs and their Japanese translations

New York City in the 1920s was the heart of a rapidly globalizing popular song style. The U.S. songwriting and publishing industry centered in Manhattan was nicknamed “Tin Pan Alley” (sometimes abbreviated as TPA), and by the 1920s it had developed a characteristic popular song style that typically included the following features.

32 measure AABA melody structure

Rhyme patterns that fit melodic patterns

Puns (語呂合わせ) and other word play

Repetition of the song title

Example 1: “Sing Me a Song of Araby”

Composed by Fred Fisher and published in New York in 1927, “Sing Me a Song of Araby” never achieved much success in the U.S. But early in 1928 a version of the sheet music was imported to Japan and translated into Japanese by music critic and radio music director Horiuchi Keizō (堀内敬三). Horiuchi’s version, “Arabia no Uta,” became a hit through radio broadcasts and records, and played a key role in bringing Tin Pan Alley influences into Japanese popular music.

The lyrics of the chorus (the main part of the song, and the only part translated by Horiuchi) are shown below, divided into four sections that correspond to the AABA melody structure. The title phrase is repeated at the end of each A-section. Note the rhyme on “sand” and “understand” that connects the first two A-sections, and on “heart,” “art,” and “part” that connects the two phrases of the B-section to each other and to the final A-section. The underlined phrase in the B-section is sung to a minor-scale melody with stereotypical “exotic” features, and the lyrics refer directly to this melody (“play that refrain”), which provides a contrast to the major-scale melody of the A-sections.

“Sing Me a Song of Araby” (1927) Music and lyrics by Fred Fisher

Original lyrics (left) and “literal” Japanese translation (right)

- | | |
|---|--|
| A) When the sun sets in the desert sand
Sing me a song of Araby. | 砂漠の砂に日が落ちる頃
アラビアの唄を唄って下さい。 |
| A) Say the words that I can’t understand,
Sing me a song of Araby. | 私の知らない言葉で
アラビアの唄を唄って下さい。 |
| B) <u>Play that refrain on the harp of my heart</u>
Vex me again with your sweet Hindu art | あのリフレインで私の心の琴線を揺らしてください。
甘いヒンズー教の魔法で惑わせてください。 |
| A) Kiss me, love, and just before we part
Sing me a song of Araby. | 恋人よ、別れにキスをして、
アラビアの唄を唄って下さい |

Horiuchi’s Japanese translation, “Arabia no Uta,” is shown below. Many details of the original lyrics are eliminated, presumably as a solution to the problem of syllable count.

The underlined phrase in the B-section, like the corresponding phrase in the original, refers directly to the minor-scale melody to which it is sung. But there are also new elements here that do not appear in the original lyrics, such as *sabishii* (lonely) and *namida* (tears). It may be that Horiuchi added these words in order to invoke the melancholy mood that had become common in many Japanese popular songs of the 1920s.

“**Arabia no Uta**” (1928) Lyrics translated by Horiuchi Keizō

「アラビアの唄」 1928年 堀内敬三訳詞

A) 沙漠に日が落ちて
夜となる頃

A) 恋人よ懐かしい
歌を唄おうよ

B) あの淋しい調べに
今日も涙ながそう

A) 恋人よアラビアの
歌を唄おうよ

Example 2: “Dinah”

The next example, “Dinah,” was published in New York in 1925, and was recorded thereafter by numerous bands and singers in the U.S. as well as in Japan and other countries. It was, in fact, a global super-hit of the 1920s and 1930s, comparable in some ways to “Let It Go” in 2013 and 2014.

“Dinah” (1925) Music by Harry Akst, lyrics by Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young

Original lyrics (left) and “literal” Japanese translation (right)

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| A) Dinah | ダイナ |
| Is there anyone finer? | よりもっといい女がいる？ |
| In the state of Carolina | カロライナ州に |
| If there is and you know her, | もしそんな人を知っているなら、見せて下さ |
| show her to me! | い！ |
| | |
| A) Dinah | ダイナ |
| With her Dixie eyes blazin’ | 炎のように輝くディクシーの瞳 |
| How I love to sit and gaze in | その目を覗き込むのが好き |
| To the eyes of Dinah Lee. | ダイナの瞳 |
| | |
| B) Every night, | 夜毎 |
| Why do I shake with fright? | 私は恐怖で震えるのは、なぜだろう。 |
| Because Dinah might | ダイナは私のことについて |
| Change her mind about me. | 気が変わるかもしれない(と考えている)から |
| | |
| A) Dinah | ダイナ |
| If she wandered to China | たとえ彼女が中国まで行ってしまっても |
| I would hop an ocean liner | 私は船に乗るよ |
| Just to be with Dinah Lee. | ダイナと共にいるため |

This song, like the previous example, has lyrics carefully crafted to fit a 32-measure AABA melody structure. The song title is repeated at the beginning of each A-section, as well as at other points in the song. The name “Dinah” also serves as a starting point for

a series of clever rhymes: finer, Carolina, China, ocean liner. (Some of these rhymes suggest a Southern accent of the kind commonly heard in North and South Carolina, where the –er ending of “finer” and “liner” would indeed be pronounced similarly to the –ah in “Dinah.”) Other rhymes include “blazin’ / gaze in” and “night / fright / might.” The masterpiece in the song’s wordplay, however, is certainly the pun on “Dinah might” (dynamite) that appears in the B-section.

As a love song, but a playful and somewhat comical one, “Dinah” lent itself to both slow romantic interpretations and uptempo jazz versions, and it was recorded many times in the U.S. Two popular recordings, by Ted Lewis and Four Dusty Travelers (1930) and by Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers (1932), especially influenced Japanese artists who recorded the song in the 1930s.

“Dinah” in Japan (1): Nakano Tadaharu and the Columbia Rhythm Boys

A pioneering Japanese jazz vocal group, Nakano Tadaharu and the Columbia Rhythm Boys (who had borrowed their name from that of Bing Crosby’s group, the Rhythm Boys) made a recording of “Dinah” in 1934, with lyrics composed by the group’s leader, Nakano Tadaharu. Nakano is credited as “lyricist” (作詞) rather than “translator” (訳詞), and indeed the lyrics are more of a substitution than a translation.

“Dinah” (1934) Lyrics and vocal by Nakano Tadaharu

「ダイナ」 1934年 中野忠晴作詞・歌

- A) ダイナ 花の小窓に 君どうたいし 恋しの歌よ
A) ダイナ 唄って頂ダイナ 踊って頂ダイナ 今宵の月に
B) 淡くもえて ぬれて泣いて 君がいとしい 影を慕いて
A) ダイナ 唄って頂ダイナ 踊って頂ダイナ 今宵の月に

Except for the repetition of the name “Dinah,” the content of Nakano’s lyric is largely unrelated to that of the original song. What is remarkable, however, is the way Nakano has substituted Japanese wordplay for the untranslatable rhymes of the English lyrics. The name “Dinah” recurs at the beginning of each A-section, as in the original, but in place of English rhymes we have Japanese puns using the phrases *utatte chōdai na* and *odotte chōdai na* (唄って頂ダイナ 踊って頂ダイナ). Thus Nakano manages to produce a verbally playful love song centered on the name “Dinah,” like the original song, but

using quite different lyrical content in a different language.

“Dinah” in Japan (2): Dick Mine

By far the most popular Japanese recording of “Dinah” was that of Dick Mine, released in 1935. On the recording he is joined by Nanri Fumio 南里文雄, Japan’s first great jazz trumpet player. Dick Mine wrote the lyrics himself, and is credited as “lyricist” rather than “translator.”

“Dinah” (1935) Lyrics and vocal by Dick Mine

「ダイナ」 1935年 デイック・ミネ作詞・歌

- A) ダイナ 私の恋人 胸にえがくは うるわしき姿 おお君よ
- A) ダイナ 紅き唇 我にささやけ 愛の言葉を
- B) ああ 夜毎 君の 瞳 したわしく 想い 狂わしく
- A) おおダイナ 許せよ くちづけ 我が胸ふるえる 私のダイナ

Dick Mine, who aspired to the style and image of a romantic crooner, has here created a romantic love song consistent with that image and inspired by the recording of American crooner Bing Crosby. He largely omits the humor of the original but retains its focus on Dinah’s features and the passionate emotions she evokes in the singer. The name “Dinah,” as usual, occurs at the start of each A-section. There is little wordplay, although the juxtaposition of *shitawashiku* and *kuruwashiku* might be heard as a kind of rhyme. This version is closer to substitution than to translation, except for certain words and phrases: *yogoto* (夜毎) is an exact translation of “every night,” and occurs at the same point in the melody structure; while *kimi no hitomi* (君の瞳) and *waga mune furueru* (我が胸ふるえる) might be loosely connected to “Dixie eyes blazin’” and “shake with fright,” respectively.

“Dinah” in Japan (3): Enomoto Ken’ichi / Satō Hachirō

A third Japanese version of “Dinah” is that of Enomoto Ken’ichi, popularly known as Enoken, a prominent comedian, actor and singer. He recorded a number of humorous interpretations of currently popular songs, and “Enoken no Dinah” is one of these.

“Enoken no Dinah” (1936) Lyrics by Satō Hachirō, vocal by Enomoto Ken’ichi

「エノケンのダイナ」 1936年 サトウ・ハチロー作詞、榎本健一歌

- A) ダンナ 飲ませて頂ダイナ おごって頂ダイナ たんとは飲まない ね いいでしょう
A) ダンナ 盃頂ダイナ コップなら尚結構 こいつはいける
B) 酒はうまい うまい 少し酔った、酔ったらさー来い
A) ダンナ 飲ませて頂ダイナ ケチケチしなさんな 駆けつけ三杯

In contrast to Dick Mine's romantic ballad, lyricist Satō Hachirō adapts the song to Enoken's style and persona by making it into a comical drinking song. He borrows the *chōdai na* pun from Nakano Tadaharu's version, and adds an additional bit of word play, replacing "Dinah" with *danna* (patron) at the beginning of each A-section. The result is very much a substitution rather than a translation, but one that is altogether consistent with the verbally playful spirit of the original song.

Translation as Humor: Ōsama's "direct translation covers"

A final example will show how a common translation problem can be turned into a creative opportunity. Japanese guitarist and singer Ōsama (王様) has made a career out of what he calls *chokuyaku* covers (直訳カバー), i.e. "direct translation" covers of American and British rock songs. As we have seen, increased syllable count is generally a barrier to any strict translation of song lyrics from English to Japanese. But Ōsama makes this problem into an asset, overloading melody phrases with extra syllables for comic effect. Perhaps the most extreme example of this technique is his version of the Beatles' "Let It Be," in which the three-syllable title phrase expands to thirteen syllables: *aru ga mama ni shite okinasai*.

“Let It Be” (1969) Music and lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney

When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be

Ōsama’s “direct translation” (訳詞: 王様)

私がとても困っているときに
聖母マリア様がやって来て
賢いことばをささやいた
あるがままにしておきなさい

Conclusions

We have seen how the need to solve problems of sound and meaning in song translation tends to push the process toward the “substitution” end of the translation—substitution continuum. Problems relating to sound (such as the need to limit syllable count) must be resolved somehow, and often the only possible solution is greater flexibility in the realm of meaning. But the necessity of “loose” translation or substitution also opens up avenues for the translator / lyricist’s creativity. Multiple versions of “the same” song can be produced, elaborating on different aspects of the original lyrics and adapted to the personas and styles of different performers. Untranslatable puns and other wordplay in the original can inspire new wordplay in the translation, and even the very difficulties of “literal” translation offer possibilities for humor.

It appears likely that the symbiotic relationship between song translation and musical globalization will continue and perhaps even intensify in the future. With the spread of social media and recording applications, it is now a simple matter for anyone who has a computer or smart phone to record their own song translations and share them with the world. The global popularity of Asian pop music genres suggests that song translations from languages other than English are likely to increase. Song translation may turn out to be a significant area for the creative development, and perhaps the democratization, of popular music in the decades to come.

Bibliography

Fisher, Fred (1927) “Sing Me a Song of Araby: Fox-Trot”, by Fred Fisher, arranged by Paul Van Loan, New York: Leo Feist Inc.

Lewis, Sam M. and Joe Young (1925) “Dinah”, words by Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young, music by Harry Akst, New York: Henry Waterson Inc.

Discography

<u>Title</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Record Number</u>
「アラビヤの唄」	二村定一・天野喜久代	Nipponophone 16855
「アラビアの唄」	二村定一	Victor (Japan) 50460
“Dinah”	Ted Lewis & 4 Dusty Travelers	Columbia (U.S.) 2181
“Dinah”	Bing Crosby & Mills Brothers	Brunswick (U.S.) 6240
「ダイナ」	中野忠晴とコロムビア・リズム・ボイズ	Columbia (Japan) 27826
「ダイナ」	ディック・ミネ	Teichiku (Japan) 342
「エノケンのダイナ」	榎本健一	Polydor (Japan) 2341
<i>Let It Be</i> (LP)	The Beatles	Apple (U.K.) PCS 7096