

The delightful ambiguities in the translation of Japanese haiku: notes on Santoka's 分け入っても分け入っても青い山

Santoka's famous haiku was written in early summer in the mountains of Kumamoto Prefecture and is perhaps his best-known poem. There are a bewildering number of translations and versions of it in English, making navigation back to the original poem potentially problematic for those less confident in Japanese. However, if one takes the plunge, this can be a very illuminating journey since it neatly illustrates the complexities, ambiguities and glorious richness both of the original and of that dicey process of translation.

Many translations and versions of this haiku are easily available on the web. <http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/taneda.html> is a comprehensive site. Unless stated otherwise, all of translations referred to in this article can be found at this site.

In *Grass and Tree Cairn*, Hiroaki Sato translates the haiku thus:

I go in I go in still the blue mountains

Note the essential difference in the Wikipedia version, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santoka_Taneda:

I go in I go in still blue mountains

There is also Takashi Nonin's

Getting further and further

Into the mountains,

But still deep blue mountains.

Jesse Glass lays it out differently, thus

Push

apart

step

thru

push
apart
step
thru
blue-green
mountain.

John Stevens has

Going deeper
And still deeper -
The green mountains.

R.H. Blyth writes

Going further into them,
And further into them,
Still more green mountains.

William J. Higginson chooses

further in yet
further in yet
green hills

On <http://www.beyond-the-pale.co.uk/santoka.htm>, we find Okami's

Going deeper
and still deeper
into green mountains.

F. Burton Watson's translation, available at <http://the-road-north.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/>, runs

the deeper I go

the deeper I go
green mountains

Finally, *Presence's* Stuart Quine has reworked the haiku as follows (from a personal email),

going deeper going deeper green mountains

How can there be so many variations? And how can it be that despite so many versions readers may still feel, even if they only understand a little of the Japanese, that something missing? Let's go through it together.

wakeitte mo wakeitte mo aoi yama

is of course a one liner, as all traditional Japanese haiku are. What is perhaps not recognised in any of the translations above except for that by Jesse Glass is that traditionally Japanese haiku are represented as vertical one-liners, thus:

分
け
入
っ
て
も
分
け
入
っ
て
も
青
い
山

English translations of haiku however are often written horizontally in romaji (the standard way of transliterating Japanese into the Latin alphabet). Sometimes these version indicate three possible syllable groupings, as below:

wakeitte /mo wakeitte mo/ aoi yama

Or, using hyphens, it is possible to indicate the separate parts (main verb – eg 'wake', suffix – eg 'itte', etc), as follows:

Wake-itte mo wake-itte mo aoi yama

Again, hyphens can be used to indicate separate syllables, which in the case below look as if they amount to fifteen, but with the glottal stop required with the pronunciation of 'it-te' amount to seventeen:

wa-ke it-te mo wa-ke it-te mo a-o-i ya-ma

In all the above examples, word divisions are added by including gaps between each word. This is not the case in other Japanese scripts where characters follow on from each other without any indication of where one word ends and another begins, the reading experience therefore we can imagine as being something like this, which allows of course for more ambiguity at times than might be the case otherwise.

In addition, Japanese characters do not show line breaks and only very rarely include punctuation. So a rōmaji version that wishes to simulate a more realistic rendering of the Japanese might run

wakeittemowakeittemoaaiyama

or, to take just one of the English translations listed above (Burton Watson's),

the deeper I go the deeper I go green mountains

Such renditions mean the readers have to work out the word breaks, which means working out which words are intended. This involves an intense close engagement with the script and the letters as they stand and also allows the readers to experience for a moment other combinations, or ghosts of combinations, hovering in the background of the primary reading. They will then, of course, also experience the effects of these combinations, which, even when discarded, may well linger, providing an enriching depth.

In the above example, a reader might begin by seeing the first few letters as spelling out 'the deeper I got', 'got' perhaps bringing a slight sense of struggle to the movement of the speaker. It is likely of course that such a reader will quickly to

revise this, as the eye continues along the line of letters, to reread it as 'the deeper I go', which suggests a smoother and possibly less troublesome movement. However, the earlier impression remains as an echo, enriching the text, and adding a sense of struggle that in this case, fortuitously perhaps, is also present in the original 'wakeittemo'.

In addition, Japanese scripts are deeply complex. The characters often afford multiple aural, visual and semantic readings that are difficult to simulate in English. A strong indication of their potential complexity is evident in the Former Qin dynasty (351-394) Chinese poet Su Hui's 'Xuanji Tu' ('Picture of the Turning Sphere'). This is the first ever palindromic poem. She wove onto brocade a twenty-nine by twenty-nine colour-coded character grid that can be read forwards, backwards, horizontally, vertically or diagonally, as well as within specific colours, amounting to at least 7,940 possible readings. For those interested, the Chinese Wikipedia entry gives a good illustration of this: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/璇玑图>.

Santoka's original haiku makes use of two Japanese writing systems. In '分け入っても分け入っても青い山', the following characters '分', '入', '青' and '山' are written in *kanji* - Chinese characters, ideograms in which one character can carry a variety of meanings. These characters, in combination or alone, can carry several different visual and aural readings depending on their context, and composite characters also include within their visual structure radicals that denote other meanings. (Radicals are sub-elements of composite kanji and carry information about the meaning or pronunciation of the composite kanji; they often also exist as characters in their own right). The kanji for 'aoi' for example, which can refer to the colour green or blue, includes in its bottom half a radical that on its own reads 'month' or 'moon'. However, no one would think of 'month' when they see the kanji for 'aoi'. On the other hand, the kanji for mountain, 山, also looks like a little range of mountains.

The second writing system that occurs in '分け入っても分け入っても青い山' is hiragana - the Japanese syllabic alphabet that adds the equivalent of prefixes and suffixes to the various Chinese characters. In Santoka's haiku, these are 'け', 'つて', 'も', 'け', 'つて', 'も', 'い'. This is another effect in reading the original haiku that it is hard to emulate in English. The Japanese has this curious switch: between characters that hold depth, visually, aurally and semantically and represent concepts, ideas or

things, and characters that more simply spell out particularly syllables.

An attempt to divide the Santoka haiku into the traditional 5-7-5 syllable count might result in 5-7-5:

wakeitte /mo wakeitte mo/ aoi yama

However, this breaks up the verb construction. A more likely division is therefore 6-6-5:

wakeitte mo/ wakeitte mo/ aoi yama

'wakeitte' comes from 'wakeiru' which means 'to go into / make one's way into'. As is common with Japanese verbs there is no subject here. It is understood. Whether it is understood it as 'one' / 'he', 'you', 'I', 'we', 'they' or 'she' is open to debate. In terms of its meaning, the dictionary definition is 'going through a crowd or into a forest', This is better understood if it is acknowledged that the verb is made up of 'wakeru' (to divide) and 'iru' (to go). This gives a sense of pushing in, pushing past, for example, forest branches – a sense of effort that the misreading of the first few words of a run-on version of Burton Watson's translation ('thedeepertogothedeepertogogreenmountains') - 'the deeper I got' - rather neatly conveys. If the haiku is divided into three lines of 6-6-5, the ending of the first line and the first verb, 'itte mo', indicates the construction 'even if' or 'despite' or 'however'. There is a sense of difficulty, an obstacle that is not overcome, as in 'however hard we try, we cannot push completely through....'. The fact this is repeated, 'wakeitte mo wakeitte mo', reinforces that sense of difficulty and obstruction.

Moving on, 'aoi' refers to the colour 'blue' or the colour 'green', or, perhaps, 'blue-green' or 'green-blue'. In this haiku, a likely reading is 'green', since it precedes 'yama', 'mountain' or 'hill', and in Japan 'yama' (which can be plural or singular – this is left open) is practically synonymous with forest. In Japan, forest and mountain coincide – the trees only remain on the steep mountain slopes and the steep mountain slopes are always covered in trees. So, whereas in English it might be tempting to go for 'distant blue mountain', in Japanese a more likely reading would be 'covered-in-green-fir-tree mountain'. This of course is the reason in the previous paragraph the example of 'wakeitte mo' or 'pushing past the forest branches' was used. The word 'forest' or 'branch' is not articulated but the sense of working hard to penetrate, pass through or over a tree-covered mountain is strong, almost physical.

However, the process of translation is not that simple. There are other approaches. It is possible to argue that if it is accepted that 'yama' already almost automatically evokes the green forest then 'aoi' can be used to give that sense of 'distant blue', as indeed Hiroaki Sato does in his translation. A counter response could easily be that 'yama' may suggest 'green forest' in Japan but it certainly does not in England, or indeed in America (I imagine), so English readers need that 'green'. What is necessary to accept is that the subtle ambiguity of 'aoi', containing both 'green' and 'blue' but also allowing a possibility of the other reading to remain, is lost in the English translation. Jesse Glass's 'blue-green' still does not emulate the ambiguity of the original. Since the need to put one colour first in English, whether it be 'blue-green' or 'green-blue', suggests a hierarchy the Japanese original escapes.

Another point to ponder, however, is that if the middle hiragana symbol 'i' or 'い' is removed from '青い山', the two kanji '青' and '山' read as 'cemetery'. This is obviously an associative visual meaning only since the use of the 'い' between them indicates clearly that the reading should be 'aoyama', as does the verb 'wakeiru' - it is not really possible to push through a cemetery. Also the syllable count suggests that the aural reading should be 'aoi yama', which is five syllables (a-o-i-ya-ma), rather than the word for 'cemetery', 'seizan', which is four syllables when counted Japanese style (se-i-za-n). Nevertheless, since 'seizan' can also be used to mean 'green/blue hill/mountain', it carries a little more weight as an alternative visual meaning, hovering in the background.

The little word 'mo' can mean 'too', 'also', 'both', 'already', so it is possible (partly because the second group of syllables starts and ends with 'mo') to argue that there might be a little 'kakekotoba' here (a hanging word: 'kake' - hanging, 'kotoba' - word). 'Kakekotoba', or pivot word, is a Japanese poetic device which allows a phrase or sentence to be read in more than one way so that various parts of that phrase in which it sits can carry different interpretations at the same time, the kakekotoba in the middle signalling a turn in semantic direction. In this case, by making use of the various meanings of 'mo', the reader can simultaneously hold in mind 'wakeitte mo' (even if we push our way into'), and also 'mo wakeitte' and 'mo yama' ('still more pushing through' and 'still more mountain'). Thus, 'mo' does double or even triple duty, offering the following interpretations:

'even if/however far we go in even if / however far we go in it is still green mountain/ even more green mountain/ more green mountain'.

A local Japanese expert informs me that we cannot read this 'mo' as 'still more', only as 'however far/deep', so it seems this rather pleasing ambiguity is not legitimate. However, the Japanese translator, Hiroaki Sato inserts just such a sense of 'still more mountain' or 'still mountain' in his choice of, variously, 'still the blue mountains' or 'still blue mountains'. And if the haiku is divided in the traditional 5-7-5 way the two 'mo's encompass the middle 'wakeitte', emphasising that sense of 'still', so as, perhaps, to allow us to append it also to 'mountain'.

So which is the best translation? There is no answer to that. Having worked through all the possible combinations above, I prefer 'green' to 'blue' and an emphasis on the 'still', 'more' meanings of 'mo' so have produced my own version of

going deeper
going even deeper
still the green mountain

You, as readers, if you have followed this line by line, character by character, should also be in a position now to choose your preferred version, at the same time as remembering all the others that may well hold something of the original that your choice will inevitably have lost.

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