

USE OF HONORIFIC IN JAPANESE

IN THE COLLOQUIAL TRANSLATION OF 1955

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Every language is necessarily an expression of an individual mentality as well as that of a social condition in a given situation. Accordingly it is quite natural that a Bible translation should reflect the social circumstances of that particular nation or society in and for which the Bible was translated. In most Oriental countries where feudalistic customs can still be widely detected, honorifics of different kinds are used both in ordinary conversation and in literary writings. In Bible translation we cannot dispense with honorifics. Even the original Greek or Hebrew is not entirely free from polite forms of address, e.g. *kratiste*, rendered "your Excellency" in the New English Bible (Lk. 1:3).¹

For an ordinary Japanese it is both strange and unreasonable that an Emperor and a commoner, a superior and an inferior should speak the same language on the same social level. It seems stranger still when a person speaks to an animal as Eve did to a serpent in the garden of Eden, or Balaam did to the ass (Num. 22:29). The same thing may be said of the expressions which Jesus Himself used when addressing the fig tree or Satan.

Personal pronouns and honorific forms

One of the specific features of the Japanese language is its numerous varieties of expression for the first and second persons, singular and plural. Years ago, the late Prof. Yoshisuke Sakon of Aoyama Gakuin, Tokyo, enumerated some 80 different words for the first person singular (including archaisms, dialects, vulgarisms, court language, women's and children's usages etc.), and some 70 words for the second person singular. When we read popular stories such as those found in newspapers and so-called best sellers, we find that a wide variety of expressions is used for designating the first and second persons, so much so that we can easily detect the kind of person it is who is speaking—Emperor, feudal lord, retainer, samurai (lesser nobility), woman, child, young or old, people of different localities, etc. The Japanese language lacks distinctions in number and gender, also in declension and conjugation. Words expressing the first and second persons tell something of the number and gender of the person in question. We had no Japanese equivalent for "he" or "they", until the Meiji era when we coined the words *kare* "he" and *karera* "they"

¹ In Hebrew consider the use of the "royal plural" and expressions for God such as "Ancient of Days", "Wonderful", "Most High" etc. Cf. also Jacob's use of "your servant" and "My Lord" in speaking to his own brother Esau, in Gen. 33:5 ff.

mainly for the necessity of translating Western literature. We are more accustomed to employ the expression, "that man", or "that woman", than to employ "he" or "she" which contain a nuance of contempt or jocularly. Of course, this kind of language usage gives foreigners a sense of vagueness, as well as of ambiguity and subtlety. These facts are nothing but reflections of actual social situations in Japan and these features prove a special burden to Japanese Bible translators.

Honorifics in Japanese are normally expressed by putting such prefixes as *o*, *on*, *mi*, *go* before a noun, and by changing the active voice of a verb to a corresponding passive voice. So it is quite possible that cases of ambiguity might arise especially in the case of honorific verbs. But as a matter of fact we can easily distinguish between a pure passive voice and an honorific expression by the context. Of course honorifics are used when reference is made to God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. (Incidentally it is a problem whether the Holy Spirit should be referred to as "he" or "it". In the Authorized Version in Rom. 8:26, "but the Spirit itself maketh intercession . . .", but in the R.S.V. and in the New English Bible, "itself" is replaced by "himself". German *selbst* may mean either himself or itself). Honorifics are also used when addressing superior persons and when their belongings are mentioned. The most common Japanese word for "you" is *anata* and this word is employed in the Japanese translation almost indiscriminately everywhere, except when those addressed are animals or trees, *omae* being used in these instances. Naturally God speaks to the serpent using *omae* instead of *anata*, and Jesus curses the fig tree in the same way. Usually *anata* is used to address superiors, while *omae* is used to inferiors, but in these days of "democratized" Japan, *anata* is increasingly used in every day conversation irrespective of the difference of social standing. If an honorific is used in connection with inanimate things, sometimes it means that those things belong to the person addressed. For instance *o-kotoba* means 'your words'; *mi-kokoro* is used for 'your will'. The honorific is not restricted to direct quotation (conversation) alone, it is also used in statements in which honorable personages are referred to, as is explained above. It goes without saying that the opponents of Jesus do not use honorifics either when they address Him or when they refer to Him. Sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether the speaker (or speakers) belongs to the third party who has neither respect nor antipathy. If the tempters of Jesus, who wanted "to take hold of" Jesus' speech, use the honorific in Lk. 20:20ff, the inevitable impression received by the reader is either of bitter irony or of a satirical remark. Generally speaking, the use of honorifics is greatly affected by the difference in social standing of the parties in question, and also by the partialty (love and hate) or impartiality of the persons involved. The Jewish opponents depicted in Jn. 8:31-59 naturally do not use honorifics in speaking to Jesus.

The problem of direct speech in the Bible

One curious example may be pointed out in this connection, i.e. the passage where Jesus gives orders to prepare the upper room in which He and His disciples are to eat the passover. In Mk. 14:14 Jesus told His disciples to tell the householder, "The Teacher says, where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?" In this case, "The Teacher says" is included in the direct quotation from Jesus' own words. It is obvious that Jesus would not have used the honorific form of "says" when He referred to Himself. But when the disciples repeated the same sentence, it is very likely that they would have used the honorific form of "says" as this refers to the words of their own Master. In the Japanese translation of this particular passage, the honorific form of "says" is therefore employed, somewhat contrary to customary Japanese usage. A certain amount of theological consideration may be required in this and other similar instances, quite apart from the Kierkegaardian notion of "indirect communication" which maintains that even verbal communication is an externalization, an objectivization, and a generalization. As most N.T. specialists may admit, the Gospels are not primarily historical records or annals, but they are confessions of the faith of the writers as well as words of worship and adoration. So the direct quotation does not necessarily convey the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus Himself. Thus Jesus' own words recorded in the Gospels are conveyed to us at least through two intermediaries, i.e. the eye-witnesses (the original disciples) and the compilers or redactors. It is obvious that these compilers of the Gospels were not sheer compilers or scientific historians who belonged to a third party, and the natural result is that we find at least three authors behind the Gospel stories—the Original Author, Jesus Himself, the original disciples, and the more or less theologically minded compilers. Therefore our primary task is not to distinguish direct and indirect quotation from the purely grammatical view-point. As a matter of fact Greek narration is not so strict in this respect as we find modern European languages to be. It is always a problem whether the famous passage in Jn. 3:16 "For God so loved the world, etc." is or is not a continuation of the answer of Jesus to the question of Nicodemus in verse 9. If not, this famous passage has originated from the comment of the compiler, or from an eye-witness, but in any case these theological comments have ultimate relevancy in Jesus Himself, His life, His teaching and His Revelation. It is also a problem in N.T. translation whether the direct quotation beginning in Rev. 11:1 ends in verse 3 or extends further on (see various modern translations). All these considerations have a bearing on the use of honorifics in such passages.

Epistolary style

In translating the Pauline and other Epistles of the N.T., there

arose among us the problem whether we should use "arimasu" (or "desu") style or "aru" style for our colloquial translation. The former is used almost exclusively in ordinary letters and conveys more politeness than the latter type which is ordinarily used for essays and scientific dissertations. But we finally adopted the latter style, mainly because we wished to retain solemnity and stylistic laconism and beauty, especially paying due consideration to the fact that they are extensively read in public worship. There may be contrary opinions in regard to this decision even among Japanese scholars, but for the time being this procedure seems to be inevitable. The last chapter of Romans may be translated using "arimasu" style, and possibly also the last two chapters of Hebrews where a more or less admonitory tone is prevalent. But this method of inducing stylistic varieties in Biblical translation has its own merits as well as demerits, often inviting us to fall into dangerous subjectivism and possibly false interpretation. It is quite natural that there should be a clear demarcation in principles and methods between a private translation, and a committee translation of the Bible such as the colloquial version.

TRANSLATION

At its best

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that we may looke into the most Holy place; that remooueth the couer of the well, that we may come by the water.

(Preface to the King James Bible, A.D. 1611)

At its worst

If you really thought the original was like that, what can you have seen in it to make you think it was worth translating?

(Robert Bridges, "Ibant Obscuri".)