

Case Study of Comparative Modern Japanese Literature English Translation : Sōseki Natsume's Botchan

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Case Study of Comparative Modern Japanese Literature
English Translation —Sōseki Natsume's *Botchan*—

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1. Introduction

Sōseki Natsume's *Botchan* was first published in 1906 in a periodical entitled *Hototogisu*, and even today it invites wide readership making it the most popular work of modern Japanese literature. There are four English translations by Yasotarō Mori, Umeji Sasaki, Alan Turney and Joel Cohn; the latter three being available today. The objective of this paper is to compare these three translations with reference to the original, taking up the question as to what extent it is possible to translate into English *Botchan*'s narrative style with retaining the crispness of colloquial speech of Tokyo, the arresting wordplay, the nicknames *Botchan* gives to the people around him, the spoken expressions, the uniquely Japanese features and dialects, etc., all of which would face literary failure if translated directly.

Botchan has been translated into a number of languages, each with its own set of similar difficulties. This article focuses on the difficulty in faithfully translating the various words and concepts used by Natsume into English.

2. Translating "*botchan*"

The novel's narrator and titular character is called *Botchan* by his landlady, Kiyo, and his fellow middle school teachers in Matsuyama. In Japanese, the word "*botchan*" is an expression used to refer to young upper class men or boys; however, it can also carry the image of a greenhorn or spoon-fed young man. The meaning invoked by Natsume depends on the interpretation and feelings of the reader. About his landlady, Kiyo, who lives in Tokyo, *Botchan* says, "No sooner had she turned out of her bed on seeing me than she asked me if I was going to have a home pretty soon, still calling me by the fond name of "*Botchan*" (boy-master)" (Sasaki 26). *Botchan* continues, "What was even more ridiculous was the way she was still called me *Botchan*, even though in her mind I was now a man of substance, not some little boy" (Cohn 24). Though Kiyo uses *botchan* as a term of respect, the narrator interprets it in a negative light. Kiyo writes a letter to *Botchan* in Matsuyama that begins with "*My Dear Botchan, I was going to answer your letter right away*" (Turney 99). Here, Kiyo's use of *botchan* is respectful and affectionate. In contrast, the narrator describes the negative perceptions of the term among the

teachers in Matsuyama: “And then on those rare occasions when they encounter somebody who’s honest and pure-hearted, they look down on him and say he’s nothing but a kid, a Botchan” (Cohn 72).

Apart from Kiyō, people tend to give a negative meaning to the term *botchan*. For example, Noda remarks “That other one is a real Tokyo character. Still just a youngster, but he does like to talk tough....Charming, isn’t it!” (Cohn 167). The original Japanese for this passage includes the word *botchan*: “*Ano otoko mo beranmee ni nite imasu ne. Ano beranmee to kitara isamihada no botchan dakara aikyou ga arimasu yo*” (394).

Sasaki and Turney translate this passage as follows:

Sasaki: “That swearer is an interesting character; he is such a hasty, driving, simple boy; there is a charm about him.” (182)

Turney “That’s true...Like the rough one that’s always using such vulgar, downtown-Tokyo language. He’s such a spirited, dashing young boy. There’s a certain charm about him.” (166)

Cohn’s translation, which seems to aim for English fluency, has dropped the idea of *botchan* entirely. Upon hearing the passage above, the narrator responds with “The brute of Noda said I was a headstrong, driving, simple boy” in Sasaki’s translation (183), “Did you hear what that swine Yoshikawa called me? A ‘dashing young boy’” in Turney’s (166) and “Did you hear that? ‘Just a youngster, but he likes to talk tough’.... Son of a bitch!” in Cohn’s (167). Later, the narrator shouts “How dare you call me a ‘boy rascal’?” (Sasaki 185), “Who’s a vulgar, downtown young boy?” (Turney 169) or “What do you mean, ‘just a youngster, but he likes to talk tough?’” (Cohn 169). In all three translations, the narrator’s reactions demonstrate the negative perceptions surrounding the term *botchan* and Tokyo dialects among the characters of the novel.

3. Translation of Japanese sounds

Botchan’s “rough-cut Tokyo style of talking” (Cohn 125) or “crude Tokyo language” (Turney 125) is made even more apparent by Botchan’s conversations with Matsuyama natives. The contrast between the Matsuyama dialect, typified by a slow, dull voice, and Botchan’s way of speaking is intended to capture the fascination of readers. During Botchan’s first lesson in Matsuyama, Botchan remarks on the Matsuyama dialect phrase *na moshi* (“isn’t it” or “you know”):

“Well, umm, when you talk so fast it’s hard to understand, umm, could you slow down just a little bit if you don’t mind—*na moshi*.” This “if you don’t mind *na moshi*” sounded awfully wishy-washy to me. (Cohn 38)

Remarking on the locusts in his bed during night duty, Botchan says,

“You fool!” retorted I. “A locust and a grasshopper are the same, only different in name. Moreover, ‘don’t you see?’ is an extremely impolite expression to your teacher. What is your *Namoshi*? *Nameshi* is eaten only when you take *dengaku*.” At this rebuff, he said that *Namoshi* and *Nameshi* are not the same.

This fellow would not give up his dreadful *Namoshi** to the last. (Sasaki 58)

Sasaki explains the Japanese terms in a footnote: “Here is a play on words, *namoshi* and *nameshi*. It is entirely beyond my power to render them into appropriate English” (Sasaki 58). Turney and Cohn treat these passages as follows:

Turney: “You damned idiot! A grasshopper and a locust are the same thing. And while we’re about it, stop finishing every confounded sentence with ‘like.’ It sounds like ‘tyke,’ and if that’s what you’re trying to call me come straight out with it and don’t mumble.” I thought that would shut him up, but no.

“Like and tyke are different, like,” he said.

Like, like, like! That’s all you ever heard out of them. (53)

Cohn: “Grasshoppers, locusts, they’re all the same! And who do you damned jackasses think you are sticking that stupid *na moshi* on the end of everything when you’re talking to a teacher? It just makes you sound mushy—that’s all it’s good for!” That ought to show them who’s boss, I thought—but they came right back with “*Na moshi* isn’t the same as mushy—*na moshi*.” It was hopeless—they couldn’t stop saying *na moshi* even if they tried. (53)

Turney translates *na moshi* as “like”, while Cohn retains the Japanese *na moshi* in the translation. Cohn even maintains *na moshi* in passages where Sasaki and Turney omit it:

Cohn: It’s one of those foreigners’ words, it seems to be their word for a lady who’s good-looking, *na moshi*. (97)

Sasaki Don’t you know Madonna means a beauty in a foreign tongue? (105)

Turney Madonna is what foreigners call a beautiful woman, I think. (96)

In the scene in which the landlady in Matsuyama says that Mr. Koga will resign and go to another school in Nobeoka, Cohn uses *na moshi* at the end of each sentence. Sasaki and Turney, on the other hand, convey the nuance of *na moshi* through the style of the landlady’s words and phrases.

Cohn “You’ve been good and hoodwinked, I see. It’s not like that at all, *na moshi*.”

“You don’t say? Well, Redshirt just told me so. If I’ve been good and

hoodwinked, then Redshirt must be a lying hoodlum.” (117)

Sasaki “You are as wrong as wrong can be.”

“Am I? But I heard it from Red-shirt himself just now. If it is not true, he must be a devilish impostor, a bundle of lies.” (127)

Turney “Ah. That, you see, is where you’re very much mistaken. That’s a different kettle of fish.”

“Is it? But I just heard it from Redshirt. I don’t know about fish, but if I am mistaken, Redshirt’s the mother and father of all cock-and-bull stories.”(117)

The narrator and the landlady then discuss Mr. Koga:

Cohn “Going out in the wild and living with the monkeys, just for another five yen a month? Who would be such a dunce?”

“Dunce? But he’s a teacher, *na moshi*!”

“All right, call him whatever you want....” (118)

Sasaki “Nobody save a *tohemboku* (fool) would wish to go to that mountainous region in order to keep company with monkeys with a little bit of increase in his salary—only five yen or so.”

“What do you mean by *tohemboku*, my dear sir?”

“Don’t be so curious, please.” (128)

Turney “I mean, no one would be fathead enough to go and live with a lot of monkeys in a place like that, stuck away in the mountains, just for the sake of five yen.”

“What does ‘fathead’ mean?”

“It doesn’t matter.” (118)

In Japanese, the contrast between the landlady’s speech, including *na moshi*, and Botchan’s rough, critical language gives a comical feel to the scene. However, if we neglect *na moshi* and focus only on fluency in English, the subtle differences between the landlady’s Matsuyama dialect and Botchan’s Tokyo dialect are lost. Cohn has therefore retained the term *na moshi* in English to preserve the special nuance of the Japanese, even at the expense of English-speaking readers’ comprehension.

A particularly difficult issue in translating *Botchan* is appropriately conveying the characters’ sense of amusement present in the original Japanese. One good example is the song sung by the geisha at Mr. Koga’s farewell party:

Sasaki The dancing girl who came and sat before me asked me if I cared to sing; taking up her *shamisen* she was ready to play the accompaniment. I told her I did not care to sing, but she should. She began singing,

With drum and bell, Santaro,
 A lost child, was searched for,
 Dondoko dongno chanchikirin!
 I too have a man I long to search
 And meet with drum and bell.
 Dondoko dongno chanchikirin!

She sang it in two breaths and said it tired her all out. (148)

Turney A geisha came and sat in front of me and asked me to sing something, holding her *samisen* ready to accompany me. I replied brusquely that I didn't sing, but told her to. She began singing:

*If they walk the streets with drum and gong,
 With a tom tom tom, and a ching ching ching,
 And find a child who is lost,
 With a tom tom tom, and a ching ching ching;
 Then beat the drum and ring the gong,
 With a tom tom tom, and a ching ching ching,
 For there's a man I too would find,
 With a tom tom tom, and a ching ching ching.*

She sang the whole song in two breaths and then said, "Whew! That's tiring." (136)

Cohn One of the geisha came over to me with her shamisen at the ready and said "You there, come on, give us a song," but when I told her that I didn't sing and that she could sing something herself instead, she treated us to a ballad:

*Beating a drum and banging a gong
 With a chanchikirin and a dondokodon
 We'll go out looking for the little lost boy.
 And if you find the boy for you
 Beating a drum and banging a gong
 Well there's someone I want to look for too
 With a chanchikirin and a dondokodon....* (136)

Turney translates the Japanese song into natural English, while Sasaki and Cohn maintain Japanese sounds in their translations.

In addition, the novel contains a number of plays on words:

Sasaki ...whether it was Madonna or *ko-danna* (young master). (70)

Turney ...Madonna or belladonna... (64)

Cohn ...Madonnas, prima donnas, whatever... (64)

Sasaki Were it a *batta* (grasshopper), or a *setta* (a kind of sandal), the fault did not lie in me. (75)

Turney Grasshoppers or clodhoppers, I wasn't the one to blame. (69)

Cohn Grasshoppers, glass choppers, whatever it was, it hadn't been any fault of mine. (68)

In these instances, both the sound and the meaning of the original Japanese cannot be simultaneously translated into English.

4. Japanese language knowledge

Botchan, being a Japanese-language work, contains descriptions of linguistic and cultural concepts intended for native Japanese-speaking readers. In order to clarify these concepts for readers who are not familiar with Japanese culture, the translator must add text explaining each idea either directly in the text or in footnotes. However, English translations typically contain few notes, and translators generally prefer not to include large amounts of explanatory text. As a result, readers of English translations can glean only the most superficial level of meaning from the text, or face difficulty in understanding concepts that come naturally to Japanese readers or those familiar with Japanese language and culture.

For instance, the following sentences in *Botchan* would likely be difficult to understand for readers with no knowledge of Japanese language:

Sasaki What the artist said had many words, but very little sense. He profusely used classical Chinese words. (94)

Turney What Yoshikawa had said was all words and no meaning. All he'd done was string a lot of long words together that made no sense. (87)

Cohn These were fine-sounding remarks, but with no meaning, full of fancy Chinese-style phrases that I could barely make head or tail of. (87)

In this passage, *Botchan* is referring to a long speech in which Noda uses many classical Chinese words and phrases to show off his liberal arts knowledge and rhetorical ability. *Botchan* is surprised by Noda's pretentious attitude. In order to fully grasp this passage, readers must be aware that knowledge of classical Chinese is a mark of sophistication in Japan. Turney's translation leaves out the notion of Chinese language entirely, rendering "Chinese" simply as "a lot of long words."

Knowledge of the Japanese writing system—which includes Chinese characters and two Japanese syllabaries—is also required to interpret some passages in *Botchan*:

- Sasaki A very bad habit had this Red-shirt, who always gave the names of foreigners in square characters (*katakana*) whenever he came across a man. (73)
- Turney Dropping foreigners' names one after the other in a conversation was a bad habit of Redshirt's. It made it sound as though he were speaking in italics. (67)
- Cohn Redshirt just loved dropping foreign names, making it sound like he was pronouncing them in some foreign alphabet, no matter who he was talking to. (66)

This example highlights the atmosphere of the time, in which it became fashionable to write European names using *katakana*, one of the Japanese syllabaries. However, the intended nuance—that Redshirt was speaking in a highly affected, un-Japanese way—is very difficult to translate into English. In order not to disturb the flow of the English, Turney and Cohn drop the word “*katakana*”, while Sasaki places “*katakana*” in parentheses to clarify the translation “square characters” (73).

In another example, Botchan remarks on a letter from Kiyo:

- Sasaki But it was altogether spelt in *hiragana* (cursive characters) with no punctuation marks. Where it began, or where it ended, was impossible to tell, and great pains were taken to punctuate it myself. (109)
- Turney She'd used very few Chinese characters and had written for the most part in the *hiragana* syllabary, so it was a terrible job to work out where one word ended and another began. (99)
- Cohn She had also run her words and phrases so close together that it was a real strain to figure out where one ended and another began. (101)

In this passage, only Cohn avoids the Japanese word *hiragana* in the translation, while Sasaki and Turner preserve the Japanese term in order to communicate to readers Kiyo's eagerness to write to Botchan despite her limited knowledge of Chinese characters.

5. Conclusion

Word for word, Sasaki's translation is careful and accurate, but some text has been omitted—for example, “There was that Omatsu the Demon in the Kabuki play, and Ohyaku the Vampire, na moshi...” (Cohn 97).

Turney's version, on the other hand, respects the target language, giving priority to English style and fluency. As a result, the novel's plot is simplified somewhat, and various Japanese cultural elements are sacrificed for the sake of comprehension in

English.

Cohn's translation manages to translate each word accurately into appropriate and sophisticated English while at the same time retaining romanized Japanese words where necessary to preserve cultural and linguistic nuances. In this sense, Cohn's version represents the best available translation of *Botchan*.

To appropriately translate *Botchan* into English, translators must seek a balance between Japanese and English. By identifying Japanese expressions with deep cultural significance and comparing them to various possible English translations, we can perform a comparative cultural study through literature.

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