

**HAIKU ȘI LIMBA JAPONEZĂ****HAIKU AND THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE****Yoshihiko IKEGAMI****University of Tokyo, Showa Women's University****Abstract**

*Haiku, acknowledged to be the shortest literary form in the world, is closely related to certain specific characters of the Japanese language. The implications of this thesis is illustrated by referring to translations of haiku pieces.*

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A word refers to a thing or referent - this is one of the standard formulae used in the discussion of meaning in Western writings on semantics. I remember I was at first bothered with the use of the phrase refer to (translated as *sasu* in Japanese) here. Why not express or represent (or *arawasu*, as we would say in Japanese) rather than refer to (*sasu*)?

It seems to me that my perplexity derived from the different ways in which language (or *kotoba* in Japanese) is traditionally conceived in the respective cultures. When a word is said to "refer to" something (as in English), the word is contrasted with the object to which it is applied. In terms of Japanese, the contrast here is between "kotoba" (word or language) and "mono" (thing). When a word is said to "(~wo) arawasu" (as in Japanese), the word is contrasted with the thought to be embodied as a word. The contrast here is between "kotoba" ("word" or "language") and "kokoro" ("heart" or "mind").

The two traditions with different conceptions of "kotoba" (or "language" or "word") go together in so far as they agree in the recognition that "kotoba" does not completely serve the purposes it is intended for. In the tradition which contrasts "kotoba" with "mono", "kotoba" is known not to be precise enough to refer in one-to-one correspondence to every relevant aspect of "mono". In the traditions which contrasts "kotoba" with "kokoro", "kotoba" is known not to be rich enough to embody all the relevant aspects of "kokoro". At this point, however, the two begin to diverge. In the first tradition, "kotoba" is elaborated (or even a new "language" is artificially created) so that an ever better fit can be obtained between "kotoba" and "mono" (- a search for a "perfect language", epitomized in the logical positivist attempt). In the second tradition, by contrast, the emphasis is shifted from "kotoba" to "kokoro": if "kokoro" is right, then "kotoba" follows suit and should be right, too. Thus the whole orientation becomes more ethical than logical. The two traditions then lead to different conceptions of the linguistic text. In the first, it is expected that the text will be self-sufficient in its signifying function thus maximally autonomous vis-à-vis its context. In the second, it is taken for granted that the text represents at best a poor reproduction of "kokoro" (in this case, nearly equivalent the thought which the text-producer intends to encode) and that the hearer/reader should actively engage him or herself in interpretive activity so that he or she may go beyond the literal meaning of the given text toward what the text-producer really means.

It will not be difficult to imagine in what way the conflict between the two different traditions becomes manifest when a haiku piece in Japanese is translated in a language like English. Let's compare two English translations of the well-known piece by Basho, "Furuike-ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto". On the one hand, one finds a translation which reads. "In to the calm old lake / A frog with flying leap goes which goes plop! / The peaceful hush to break". One immediately notices that so much is explicitly encoded here that is only implied (and therefore, not linguistically encoded) in the original, the original does not say that the old pond is "calm"; it does

not say anything about “the flying leap”, the sound “plop”, and the broken silence which ensues. All these aspects are only implied in the original - to be imaginatively constructed by the readers. The translation is semantically quite straightforward; the image it evokes is a very clear one. But the reader who knows the original will certainly miss the potential ambiguity functioning as source of poetic effect in the original and may blame the translation for committing the sin of the heresy of paraphrase. All this is the consequence of the translation being prepared in line with the conception of language compatible with the target language (i.e. English).

What happens if the translation is prepared in a way that agrees with the conception of language (i.e. Japanese)? An example of such a translation will be the following:

“An old pond / A frog jumps in / The sound of water”. The reader who does not know the original will find the translation piece rather fragmentary, lacking the degree of cohesion customarily expected of a text.

A puzzled response like “So what?” can very well be expected to ensue here.

Hovering between the two contrasting conceptions of language, any translations of haiku is subjected to the state of “double-bind”. Isn’t there any way out? Of course, there is, consider the situation one is involved in when one is presented with poetic language (or for that matter, child language). In any culture, anyone engaged in interpreting a piece of poetic language (or child language) knows full well that he or she must go beyond the mere sum of the strictly literal meanings of the words he or she actually reads or hears and looks for what is really meant (i.e. “kokoro”) by the encoder. But notice that Japanese is a sort of language which to a great degree expects such active response of the reader or the hearer already at the level of daily language.

It will readily be understood that the essence of haiku lies in the artistic sublimation of the same linguistic function characterizing the Japanese language in its daily use. It is an artistic genre whose function presupposes the maximal engagement on participation on the part of the reader. A fair recognition of this point will certainly help to eliminate the undue, superficial misunderstanding-understanding about haiku, on the one hand, and will suggest the right way to proceed when the speaker of a language other than Japanese tries to explore the possibility of haiku-like linguistic creativity in his or her own language.