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Aspects of the never-ending translation wars in South Korea

A cultural phenomenon and its reasons

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Abstract

Translation has always occupied a major role in Korea's often-painful process of modernization. In this context, frequent "translation wars" stand out, especially when the zealous debates on mistranslations are not only battled out within the narrow confines of professional circles but also captivate the general public, as occasionally happens.

The fact that public discourse about the quality and reliability of translations is much more common in South Korea than anywhere in the West constitutes a phenomenon very telling about South Korean society and mindsets in many ways. This cultural anthropological significance was, however, never considered a matter deserving academic attention in and of itself.

Conspicuously, the public denunciation of translation mistakes, as practiced in Korea, often targets not only the immediate culprits but proclaims to expose basic mental attitudes of the general public. In such cases, the implication is that Korean audiences lack self-assurance and tend to meekly accept dubious passages because they are conditioned to suspect themselves of being simply too stupid to understand.

The translation wars going on in Korea are epitomized by encyclopedic (and partly nevertheless idiosyncratic) books that present vast collections of detected mistakes. Usually, these books receive a lot of media coverage and trigger multifaceted debates. One regularly recurring motif of the talk on mistranslations is – as shall be shown in this paper – the supposed disgrace and disadvantage occasioned when Koreans are left with imperfect renderings of insights easily gleaned by others in the rest of the world who read, if not the originals, at least perfectly faithful translations.*

Introduction

Popular debate around the quality and reliability of translations seems much more common in South Korea than in any country of the West. Be it debates about alleged bad translations of famous modern classics, be it the tracking down of mistranslations in dubbing and subtitling, be it the fight between two publishing houses who each praise their own translation at the expense of the other, or be it the newest scandals about professors and celebrities who do not really carry out themselves the translations credited to them: Translation issues use to capture the attention of South Korean media and thus the general public every now and then.

Epitomized is this fascination or even “obsession” with translation mistakes by voluminous books that are basically compilations of translation mistakes. The *Oyŏk sajŏn* (“Mistranslation dictionary”), authored by veteran translator An Chŏng-hyŏ,¹ even found its way onto the bestseller shelves of big bookstores and was extensively covered by media. Precursors of this book include Kang Tae-jin’s *Chanhokhan ch’aek ilkki* – its cover adorned with an English parallel title: “Merciless scrutiny: Reviews of translations”²; *Yŏngmi myŏngjak, choŭn pŏnyŏk ūl ch’ajasŏ* (“Anglo-American classics. On the lookout for good translation”), edited by the Yŏngmi munhak yŏn’guhoe (Society for the Research of Anglo-American Literature)³; and, in two volumes, *Ch’oego ūi kojŏn pŏnyŏk ūl ch’ajasŏ* (“On the lookout for the best translation of literary classics”) edited by Kyosu sinmun.⁴

Besides the scrutiny applied to Korean translations of Western literature, it seems that only translations of premodern *hanmun* (Korean literature written in the literary Sinitic, i.e., classical Chinese) occasionally manage to move into focus. For example, Kim Hyŏl-jo managed to garner much public attention in 2009 for his modern Korean rendering of one of the proudest examples of Korean “classical” literature, Pak Chi-wŏn’s *Yŏrha ilgi*. Kim Hyŏl-jo justified his endeavor by pointing out many mistranslations in previous modern renderings as well as the stubborn persistence of some mistakes because of the habit of “plagiarizing” previous translations.⁵

All in all, translation comes across in South Korea as a topic that is able to grab public attention and this perhaps reflects the decades-old nationwide craze about English-language skills. “Translation matches” are conducted among bloggers and netizens who debate about the correct rendering of (usually) a word or (more rarely) even a full passage, while even newspaper editorials can be devoted to specific translation issues.

¹ Published by OPEN BOOKS in 2013.

² Published by Chagŭn iyagi in 2004.

³ Published by Ch’angbi in 2005.

⁴ Published by Saenggag-ŭi namu in 2006 and 2007.

⁵ See Kim Hyŏl-jo: “‘Yŏlha ilgi’ pŏnyŏk ūi yŏrŏ munjedŭl [Various problems around the translation of the Yŏlha Diary]” *Hanmun hakpo* 19 (2008): 679–718. Heo, Mi-gyeong: “A Complete Translation of the Great Work of Yeonam” *Korea Focus*, September 25, 2009. Related to the general matter of dissent about translations of hanmun cf. Wook-Dong Kim: “Two Korean translations of the Xiaoxue: Free translation or literal translation?” *Babel* 61 (2015), no. 4: 589–603.

1. A surplus value of translation critique?

While some complain about the berating of translators and the harsh labeling of (by a look at the bigger picture) perfectly justifiable translatorial decisions as mere “mistakes,” others are convinced that in the end the hunt for mistakes and the exposure of underperformers will benefit Koreans and lead to an improvement of translation quality while, at the same time, making Koreans more mature. This latter idea implies that Koreans should not be intimidated in the case of translations that make no good sense. In other words, they should not attribute a perceived obscurity simply to their lack of the ability to understand. Shying away from criticizing and being willing to suspect oneself as not up to grasp the sense of something rather than suspecting the unintelligible message or messenger: this might indeed be a mental habit deeply engrained in Korea,⁶ and thus translation critique via blogs and forums might, from a sociologist’s or a cultural anthropologist’s point of view, be seen as a healthy liberation from the usual wary attitude that is inclined to interpret the apparent speck of sawdust in the brother’s eye (i.e. the passage that does not make good sense) as only an illusion produced by the plank in the own eye (i.e. one’s deficiencies, a presumed inability to recognize the good sense of an obscure phrase).

2. The role of cyberspace

The fact that debate on translation even makes it into the news headlines mirrors the status of Korea and its book market as a real “standout country in the realm of translation”⁷ (Kim Ji-won 2013: 50), and it is also a proof of the outsized role of English in modern South Korea. Translation and linguistic abilities had already played a big role in Korea’s often painful process of modernisation. But in the recent decades of Korean education fever, learning English has certainly become the biggest bother of the average Korean adolescent. This environment eventually produces all those numerous readers and netizens who are sufficiently able to judge translations by comparing them with the original. And while they are not blessed with the opportunity to translate on their own – because of the competition or because they lack the necessary network or because their active skills are not on a par with their passive ones – they form a big pool of people who act as grassroots critics and, indeed, merciless scrutinizers of the translations that careless publishers want to sell to them. As underdogs they do not have access to the most venerable media, but in the internet this disadvantage can disappear. The immense power of cyberspace in South Korea has thus facilitated the emergence of “online translation assessors” serving as “expert-judge”.⁸

⁶ I am well aware that this is a highly precarious statement, in the vein of Hofstede’s famous cultural dimensions. However, for my limited purpose here I dare suggest this as an intuitive insight based on rich personal experience. Anyway, this is not important for my argument. Important is only that this concept (Koreans rather suspect themselves in case of a perceived unintelligibility) seems to exist in Korean discourse.

⁷ Kim Ji-won: “Korean Tradition of Translation: From the Gabo Reform to the Present” *Pönyöghak yön’gu* 14 (2013), no. 3: 50.

⁸ Cf. Ji-Hae Kang: “Conflicting discourses of translation assessment and the discursive construction of the ‘assessor’ role in cyberspace”, *Discourse Analysis in Translation Studies*, ed. by Jeremy Munday and Meifang Zhang. Amsterdam: John Benjamins 2017, pp. 131–148. [Also in *Target* 27 (2015), no. 3: 454–471.] As for a most recent discussion of the increasingly big role of the crowd intelligence in translation assessment see Miguel A. Jiménez-Crespo: “Crowdsourcing and translation

A very peculiar case and much-noticed case of a translation war flared up after the Korean translation of Steve Jobs' autobiography was released.⁹ The dispute eventually led to another “translation battle” between two translators who had taken part in the discussion. Both uploaded one page of a translation of *How to Survive the End of the World as We Know It* (by James Wesley Rawles) online and asked readers to judge.

Interestingly, a Korean translation app, called Flitto, uses exactly this willingness of many people to partake in discussion about the right Korean rendering of foreign language for crowdsourcing its human postediting of machine-generated translations.¹⁰

3. Losing out in the global world because of wrong translations?

South Korean society seems also obsessed by the belief in a wide range of possible negative outcomes caused by incorrect translation in practical life, be it in the cockpit of an airplane, be it in diplomatic exchange, be it in business exchange.¹¹ A book that epitomizes this very Korean fascination with failed communication is Sō Ok-sik's *Oyōk ūi cheguk – kŭ kōjit kwa waeguk ūi segye* (the English parallel title on the cover says: *The Empire of Misinterpretation & Mistranslation: The World of Inaccuracy and Distortion*).¹²

As for first-glance explanations for this peculiarity, a number of reasons come to mind: When Korea was forced to open up to international trade, an elite of open-minded people soon recognized translation as a means to catch up, to appropriate modernity and get on a track with obviously more advanced countries. Ever since then, complaints about translators who withhold important information are common.¹³ The worry that Koreans might be left with imperfect renderings of wisdom, insights and messages that others in the rest of the world can easily access—and thus the worry that the whole country might end up ridiculed—seems to be an underlying motive for the zeal that characterizes many a debate. It is embarrassing if Koreans have a misleading translation of international treaties, not to mention the possibility of concrete disadvantages that might arise. If the titles of foreign movies are mostly mistranslations, then Koreans are excluded from something that unites the rest of the world.¹⁴

quality: Novel approaches in the language industry and translation studies”, *Translation Quality Assessment: From Principles to Practice*, edited by Joss Moorkens, Sheila Castilho, Federico Gaspari, Stephen Doherty. Cham: Springer 2018, pp. 69–94.

⁹ For English-language coverage of this quarrel, see an article published by Lee Woo Young in the *Korea Herald* on May 14, 2014: “Disputes show importance of translation” (<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140514001021>).

¹⁰ Kim Young-nam [Korea and the fourth industrial revolution (13-1 Translation)]: “Lost in translation? Ask a machine” *Korea Joongang Daily* 17 July 2017 (<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3035927>)

¹¹ While the rage in translation wars is often ridiculed by bystanders and by those unimpressed by literature, but also often by professional translators who do not like to be questioned, it should not be forgotten that translation mistakes can indeed have the gravest consequences. Interpretation is not simply up to the listener, as some overdone philosophy would have us believe – liability can easily arise if the intention of the speaker is dismissed. And thus translation matters are often, potentially, even legal matters, to be decided, in the worst case, by a lawful judge. See Jody Byrne: “Caveat Translator: Understanding the Legal Consequences of Errors in Professional Translation” *JoSTrans* 7 (2007): 2–24. (https://www.jostrans.org/issue07/art_byrne.php)

¹² Published by Tori in 2013.

¹³ See Kim Ji-won: “Korean Tradition of Translation: From the Gabo Reform to the Present” *Pōnyōghak yōn'gu* 14 (2013), no. 3: 41–63. Kim Won-Hee: *Die Geschichte der Translation in Korea* [The history of translation in Korea]. Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2012. The other side of the spectrum involved complaints about not preserving a genuine Korean style and betraying Korean language.

¹⁴ Kim Wook-Dong: “Lost in translation: (Mis)translation of foreign film titles in Korea” *Babel* 63 (2017), no. 5: 729–745.

Such worries are echoed in the claim by the publishing company Saeum that the original Korean translation of Camus' *L'Étranger* had many translation errors. On the release of their new translation, Saeum even argued, on an advertisement ribbon emblazoning the book, that *The Stranger* Koreans had read so far was not Camus' original text ("Uri ka ilgün 'Ibangin' ün K'amui üi "Ibangin" i anida"). This strategy worked. The Yonhap News Agency headlined an article with the statement that the previously established translation of *L'Étranger* was a bundle of mistakes ("oyök t'usöngi")¹⁵, while the Huffington Post introduced its report on the debate ("Alberü K'amui 'Ibangin' pönyök nonjaeng") with the question whether Koreans hadn't completely misunderstand Camus' *L'Étranger* for the past 25 years ("Han'gugin ün chinan 25-nyön'gan Alberü K'amui üi 'Ibangin' ül wanbyökhage ohae haenna?").¹⁶

It is not without irony that Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, a book that in itself had generated much controversy due to alleged errors and mistakes, was, according to some critics, so poorly translated into Korean that the publisher was pushed to reprint a revision and then a retranslation.¹⁷

4. The role of English

In Korea, being exposed with bad knowledge of English is a thing that would even make otherwise hard-boiled gangsters blush, as popular movies show,¹⁸ while on the other hand Koreans are all too willing to believe heroic stories of fabulous foreign language skills acquired by model meritorious individuals who achieved their goal by grueling discipline in their studying habits. A popular belief among Koreans is that the Japanese perform much worse in English than the Koreans, and so a mischievous pleasure is derived from stories of Japanese blunders in communicating with English speakers, epitomized by the infamous encouragements in hotel rooms to "take advantage of the chamber-maid" or to "turn the room-lady on".

Only rarely does the public get involved in translation wars about foreign literature from other languages than English. The abovementioned case of Camus is one example. Another one would be the Kant translation dispute, which will be mentioned further below.

Recently, translations of Korean literature into Western language, especially, of course into English, come into the spotlight more and more, although the interest seems to be more confined to the academic public. As a rule, only modern or contemporary literature is getting attention.¹⁹

(<https://m.news.naver.com/read.nhn?oid=001&aid=0009848019&sid1=103&backUrl=%2Fhome.nhn&light=off>)
The Korean subtitling for the latest sequel of the *Avenger* series enraged 3000 people to the point that they signed a petition to the Blue House. See "Lost in (Mis)Translation: Korean's Incensed Over Translations in 'Avengers: Infinity War'" (<https://haskorea.com/lost-in-mistranslation-koreans-incensed-over-translations-in-avengers-infinity-war/>)

¹⁵ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/culture/2014/03/27/0901000000AKR20140327193400005.HTML>

¹⁶ https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2014/03/29/story_n_5053660.html

¹⁷ Despite all this, the book was a tremendous success in Korean. See "Korean Edition of 'Da Vinci Code' Slammed for Mistranslations", *Chosun ilbo* March 6, 2005 (http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2005/03/06/2005030661014.html).

¹⁸ See for example the hilarious scene in *Marrying The Mafia 2* where the question arises as to how the fruit "orange" is called in English – the relieving answer is "Del Monte"; but the knowledgeable gangster meets his limits when asked what "Sunkist" would be in English.

¹⁹ As for even a book-length exception, see O Yun-sön: *Han'guk kososöl yöngyökpön üro üi ch'odae*. Seoul: Chimundang 2008.

Many of these evaluations are actually less focused on mistakes but still very much oriented around the conventional paradigm of “loss”. Losses as well as perceived praiseworthy decisions are mostly detected in terms of vocabulary. Still, some prototypical purported landmark mistakes made by translators of Korean literature have already reached some fame, getting quoted even in popular discourse. A typical example was the blaming of a team of (actually two very experienced) translators for their purported “mistake” of translating the proverb “pal ōmnūn mal i ch’ōlli rŭl kanda” very literally with “A horse with no legs goes a thousand leagues”. As a matter of fact, this rendering of the proverb is perfectly justified because the context makes it clear anyway that this is not supposed to be taken literally; thus the reader will guess here that, obviously, Koreans use this saying as a picture for the speedy spreading of stories and rumors, and consequently as a warning to be cautious with words.²⁰ Supposing that the translators might not have been aware of the homonymy of “mal” (“word” as well as “horse”) shows a prevailing spirit that rather prefers to assume the worst possible ignorance instead of looking for good reasons that might explain a less obvious decision as a deliberate choice (which they preferred to, e.g., “Words have no legs but go a thousand leagues”).

5. Quarreling about words, neglecting syntax

What is striking from a majority of the cases publicly debated and of the mistakes pointed out is the fact that the accepted concept of mistake seems largely confined to vocabulary, idioms and collocations. One field where the *mot juste* is indeed crucial is terminology. Recently, some philosophers in Korea became incensed by unconventional terms used in the new Korean edition of Immanuel Kant’s complete works – one of the few cases in which a translation from another source language than English caused a major translation war in Korea.²¹

While the critics are preoccupied with the *mot juste*, there is usually no bothering about syntax—while in fact this would be the most interesting part. This applies also for the most detailed and academically sound guideline to translation between Korean and English to date, Jieun Kiaer’s *Routledge Course in Korean Translation*, published this year. While there is one chapter devoted to syntax – actually, it is only a sub-chapter to the chapter “Grammar matters”, called “Structure matters” – and while the author deserves great merit for her pointing out that Korean native speakers process the elements of a sentence according to the order of their appearance²² instead of waiting until the end for a final assessment (as learners of Korean often tend to believe, with teachers also tending to instill such a belief), Kiaer nevertheless does not, not even once, consider the question of whether the “order

²⁰ Cf. Charles LaShure’s analysis on his blog: www.liminality.org/archives/208

²¹ See pars pro toto this part of the ardent debate in the *Hankyoreh* on June 27, 2018: Kim Sang-bong: “Paek Chong-hyŏn kwa Chŏn Tae-ho ūi pip’an e taehan taedap” [Answer to the critique by Paek Chong-hyŏn and Chŏn Tae-ho] (<http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/book/850905.html>).

²² “(...) native speakers of Korean do not rearrange the order of a sentence but aim to understand what is given, following the presented order. This is also what learners of Korean should be aware of. It is intuitive to build meaning as one goes on, instead of rearranging information.” (Jieun Kiaer: *Routledge Course in Korean Translation*. New York: Routledge 2018, p. 52.)

of structures”²³ should have implications for the translation’s order of ideas, i.e. how, in which sequence, the translator arranges the words.

Moreover, there is a certain common tendency to dwell on sentences without giving the context. In fact, Korean books meant for bolstering English vocabulary usually only provide isolated sentences as examples, failing to embed these sentences into situations that would help to disambiguate the meaning. On the other hand, some compilations of mistakes (the abovementioned *Oyōk sajōn* and others) seem to have earned their reputation, thanks to close and very meticulous contextual analysis.

6. Either you know Korean or you don’t?

In principle there is an unfortunate tendency in Korea to believe that right decisions can be demanded from a translator all the time (all the more from an interpreter, of course). A translator is supposed to be a Doctor Know-all, not taking into consideration that the Western translator might make up for his/her deficiencies by a consequent consulting of Korean native speakers (let alone dictionaries, the internet, and other means).

This became evident in the highly interesting debate triggered by the very successful English translation of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*. When the craze about this Man Booker Prize-winning translation was over, making way for voices raising concerns and pointing out numerous mistakes, reasonable translation critique seemed victorious over clueless adulation. But exactly the most substantial critic and fault finder disavowed himself by his verdict that a lack of knowledge of Korean culture and Korean language was responsible for these many mistakes.²⁴ This judgment is certainly wrong, as all the incriminated mistakes, painstakingly detected by the critic, could have been avoided if the translator Deborah Smith had been honest with herself and thus on alert, checking and re-checking (and, if necessary, correcting) her understanding by consulting native speakers, etc. (Of course, simple dictionaries would also have helped in some cases.) The bashing of purportedly insufficient language proficiency on the part of an inbound translator seems to be a deliberate strategy to prolong an actually very strange situation: For decades, it used to be common that Koreans were invested with the task to translate Korean into foreign languages.²⁵ What is also not considered by the critic: Good translation can, of course be born from the “flow”, when a highly skilled person enjoys work and forgets everything around. But it could also be the product of “arousal”, when a person with not-so-perfect skills takes on the challenge appropriately and thus is constantly on the watch, double-checking all the time.²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁴ Wook-Dong Kim: “The *Creative* English Translation of the *Vegetarian* by Han Kang”, *Translation Review* 100 (2018) 1: 65–80. For example (p. 73): “Nowhere is her inadequate knowledge of Korean more conspicuous than in this type of translation error.”

²⁵ Be it 15 years ago, the following remark by Ross King is still not outdated: “It strikes me as rather odd that what passes as common sense virtually everywhere else in the world – namely, that the very best literary translation is always accomplished by ‘inbound’ translators translating into their mother tongue – is viewed almost as a revelation in Korean academic and funding circles” (“Can Korean-to-English literary translation be taught? Some recommendations for Korean funding agencies”. Korean Literature Translation Institute, eds.: *2002 Seoul Symposium on Literature and Translation*, pp. 211–225.)

²⁶ See Hervey, Sándor / Loughridge, Michael / Higgins, Ian: *Thinking German Translation. A course in translation method:*

Instead of a conclusion

While Koreans would never choose a foreigner to translate a book into Korean and while even foreigners whose proficiency in Korean is otherwise well acknowledged will never in earnest come into consideration for doing such a job (Koreans would consider their own language as much more full of pitfalls than e.g., English), Koreans are translating Korean literature into Western languages, and many consider this to be an inevitable practice. The time has come for Westerners to specifically target such translations, not necessarily with “merciless” scrutiny, but nevertheless for the sake of future advancement.