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# NEWS TRANSLATION IN JAPAN

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*Time Magazine*, in its August 1, 1983 special issue on Japan, wrote about the Japanese language under the astounding headline : "The Devil's Tongue". *Time* also quoted former U.S. Ambassador Edwin O. Reischauer as saying that Japanese ideas are transmitted abroad only very weakly and through the filter of a few foreign "experts".

In the field of journalism, however, Japanese newsmen are "brave and courageous" enough to undertake the difficult task of translating the "devil's tongue" into English and vice versa by means of performing what could be called the role of a gatekeeper.

As far as this writer knows, Kurt Lewin was the first person that used the word "gatekeeper" in the field of communication research. Bruce Westley, in his well-known book, *News Editing*, summarizes Lewin's gatekeeper theory in this way : "Dr. Lewin suggested that the content of the flow of ideas and information through the institutionalized communication channels can be profoundly affected by the person or persons who man 'gates' along channels." According to Westley, David M. White wrote in more detail about the "gatekeeper role" and "emphasized the point that he (a newspaper copy desk) plays an important role at the terminal 'gate' in the complex process of communication — at least to the extent of the availability of materials to readers. What he chooses to keep out of the paper will obviously not reach his readers." It should be noted here that White referred to what could be described as the "message controlling function" of a newspaper copy desk.

In one of the classic research books on communication, *Personal Influence*, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld also refer to the "gatekeeping role" performed by opinion leaders and say : "Gatekeeping means controlling a strategic portion of a channel — whether that channel is for the flow of goods, or news, or people — so as to have the power of decision over whether whatever is flowing through the channel will enter the group or not."

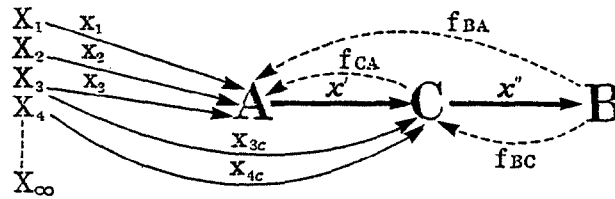
We have now seen what American communication researchers think about the "gatekeeper role". To them, gatekeeping means controlling the quantity of message flowing through a channel, and this message controlling function is characterized by a decision about whether a specific message should flow through the gate or not.

It seems to the writer that the gatekeeper role played by Japanese news reporters in charge of introducing foreign news into Japan or Japanese events into foreign countries by means of translation is not limited to the simple task of controlling the quantity of message. Their role apparently goes beyond that. How far does it go ?

The most effective and clear-cut analysis of their role, it seems, can be made through revision of the "Westley-MacLean model". Given below is the original W-M model, though it is simplified a little by the current writer for reasons of convenience.

The two scholars explain the model this way :

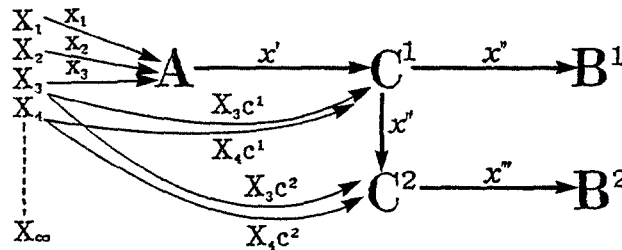
The messages C transmits to B (x") represent his selections from both messages to him from A's (x') and C's selections and abstractions from Xs in his own sensory field (X<sub>3c</sub>, X<sub>4c</sub>), which may or may not be Xs in A's field. Feedback not only moves from B to A (fBA) and from B to C (fAC) but also from C to A (fCA).



Needless to say, in the process of mass communication, (C) could be a news reporter or a group of reporters, while (A) could be the news source and (B) the receiver, that is, mass audience — newspaper readers, radio listeners or television viewers. Westley and MacLean, writing about the role of (C), say that (C) is :

one who can a) select the abstractions of object X appropriate to B's needs, satisfactions or problem solutions, b) transform them into some form of symbol containing meanings shared with B, and finally c) transmit such symbols by means of channel or medium to B.

It should be pointed out, however, that the original W-M model does not work effectively to describe the complex communication process in the field of news translation. In the case of translation from Japanese news into English news, for instance, the Japanese-language news reporters or group of reporters should be ( $C^1$ ) and their receivers ( $B^1$ ), while a Japanese newsmen or group of newsmen in charge of translating the Japanese-language news into English should be ( $C^2$ ) and their receivers ( $B^2$ ). Taking this into consideration, the writer has ventured to revise the W-M model this way :

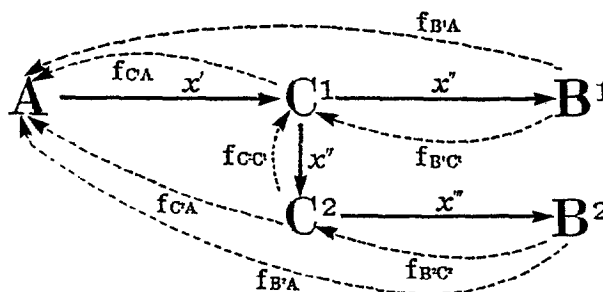


Take a fictitious news conference by Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, for instance, and see how the revised model works. If Nakasone (A) says in Japanese : "*Chikai uchi ni kita-chosen o otozuretemo yoi* (I wouldn't mind visiting North Korea shortly)", this remark will be ( $x'$ ). And if a news reporter working for the *Asahi Shimbun* ( $C^1$ ) reports in Japanese that "*Nakasone sori wa kita-chosen tonno kokko o seijoka suru tame chikai uchi ni kita-chosen o homon suru iko o akiraka ni shita* (Prime Minister Nakasone has expressed his intention to visit North Korea shortly in an effort to normalize relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang)", this report will be ( $x''$ ), which will be read by *Asahi Shimbun* readers ( $B^1$ ).

The Japanese-language news script ( $x''$ ) is also sent to the newsroom of the *Asahi Evening News* ( $C^2$ ), an English-language evening paper operated by the *Asahi Shimbun*, which publishes both morning and evening papers. The *AEN* staff may write this way :

"Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has said he may visit Pyongyang shortly in an effort to normalize relations between Japan and North Korea". This will be ( $x$ ), which will be read by the *AEN* readers ( $B^2$ ). The writer has deliberately made a slight change in wording between the Japanese news and its English counterpart, hoping that such message manipulation may help clarify ( $C^2$ )'s "selections and abstractions from  $X$  in ( $A$ )'s own sensory field ( $X_3C^2$ ) or ( $X_4C^2$ )".

There is no doubt that the complex process of communication is also characterized by a constant flow of feedback. It is possible to imagine that in this news translation process, feedback flows in the following manner :



Let's think about "Nakasone's news conference" once again. An *Asahi Shimbun* reporter may ask the prime minister at the end of the news conference, "Mr. Prime Minister, let me ask you this question. The purpose of your possible visit is naturally to pave the way for normalizing Japanese-North Korean relations, isn't it ?" If the reporter gets an affirmative response from Nakasone, then it is feasible to relate ( $C^1$ )'s message to ( $f_{C^1A}$ ). And an *Asahi Evening News* reporter may call the *Asahi Shimbun* newsman and ask : "Did you believe that Mr. Nakasone was seriously thinking about visiting Pyongyang ?" If the *Asahi Shimbun* reporter, who was present at the news conference, replies that the prime minister may not have been so serious when he made the remark, then the English-language expression — "has said he may visit Pyongyang" could well be linked to ( $f_{C^2C^1}$ ).

We have so far made an armchair study of how the revised Westley-MacLean model works in the process of news translation. Now this writer wishes to take a look at an actual piece of news and its translation in an effort to delve into what could be called "the gatekeeper role".

The *Asahi Shimbun* printed the following Japanese-language news item in its March 20, 1986 morning issue. Here is a relatively literal translation :

A senior Foreign Ministry official disclosed on the 19th that the ministry, as part of its policy to use exchange rate profits resulting from the appreciation of the yen and the drop in crude oil prices, is studying a plan to siphon off about yen 50 billion in the form of contributions to the Japan Foundation from private corporations. The Foreign Ministry has already started negotiations with finance officials on such matters as tax-exempt measures for such contributions. According to the plan, private contributions will be added to the Japan Foundation's pool of capital and the money's operational profits will be spent for expanding international exchange programs such as the invitation of senior high school teachers from the United States for inspections and the establishment of Japanese information centers in foreign countries.

The Japan Foundation, when it was established in the 47th year of the Showa era, was to receive yen 50 billion each from the government and the private sector. But the private sec-

tor, hit by recession in the wake of the energy crisis and other factors, has so far donated only yen 6 million, and up to now the foundation has operated on the basis of yen 48,5 billion financed by the government. In the light of this background and from the viewpoint of using the exchange rate profits on an international scale, the Foreign Ministry has decided to call on the private sector to donate yen 50 billion — its outstanding obligation. In line with this policy, the ministry has already launched negotiations with the Finance Ministry over revision of the tax law that has so far made only a limited amount of contributions tax-exempt, and at the same time senior ministry officials, headed by Foreign Minister Abe, have started soliciting contributions from the business community. The ministry is planning to speed up adjustment of views among the government agencies involved so as to incorporate the plan into the government's economic package scheduled to be worked out at the beginning of April.

And the *Asahi Evening News* carried the following article in its March 20, 1986 issue :

The Japan Foundation is studying plans to use about yen 50 billion in exchange rate profits to finance international exchange programs, a Foreign Ministry official said Wednesday. The money would be secured in the form of contributions from private corporations which have made windfall profits from the recent surge in the yen's exchange value and the drop in oil prices, the official said.

The official, who asked not to be identified, said the money would be used, for example, to invite senior high school teachers from the United States and set up Japan information centers in foreign countries.

The foundation, when it was established in 1972, was to receive yen 50 billion each from the government and the private sector. So far the government has given yen 48,5 billion but private organizations have contributed only about yen 6 million.

The official said the Foreign Ministry has already launched an effort to solicit contributions from the business community and that the Finance Ministry is considering making these contributions completely tax exempt.

The plan to absorb some of the exchange gains in the form of contributions to the Japan Foundation is expected to be included in the government's economic package to be announced next month.

In Japan, as in other advanced countries, a big newspaper like the *Asahi Shimbun* relies on its own correspondents stationed in scores of countries for foreign news and uses wire service dispatches only to check developments or to supplement the correspondents' reports. Moreover, wire service news is often rewritten hour by hour as events develop. And this makes it extremely difficult for an outsider like this writer to believe that a specific news item printed in the *Asahi Shimbun*, for instance, must have been based on a specific wire service dispatch carried by an English-language paper.

All the "Big Three" Japanese national papers — the *Asahi*, the *Yomiuri* and the *Mainichi*, each with millions in circulation — operate English-language dailies which depend upon their parent newspapers for domestic news, though they often use English news sent by the Kyodo World Service, the international division of Japan's Kyodo News Agency. And therefore, in the case of translation of a Japanese news item into English, it is much easier for an outsider to trace the original-translation relationship, specially when the piece of news in question is a scoop, for example.

The writer, with his own newsroom experience of nearly 10 years at Radio Japan, the overseas broadcasting service of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), can say without a bit of hesitation or apprehension that the news article introduced above definitely must have been a translation on the part of the *Asahi Evening News*.

Even a quick glance at the literal translation and the *AEN* article reveals the gatekeeper role of controlling the quantity of message. The literal translation consists of 327 words, while the *AEN* report is written with only 199 words — 60,9 percent of the literal translation. The words and expressions that "were forbidden to flow through the channel" include "hit by recession in the wake of the energy crisis and other factors", "in the light of this background and from the viewpoint of using the exchange rate profits on an international scale" and "in line with this policy". It is worth noting that all the transitional phrases in Japanese have been deleted in the English version. The number of words in a sentence has been also cut drastically. The literal translation is composed of eight sentences with a total of 327 words. The average number of words in a sentence in the literal translation is 40,9, and this figure is reduced to 28,4 words in the *AEN* article. Specifically noteworthy is the lead. The literal translation lead has 58 words while the *AEN* lead has only 26 words, apparently in line with the recent English-news trend toward a brief lead.

A closer and more careful look at the literal translation and the *AEN* article shows that the gatekeeper role is not limited to that of controlling the quantity of message. One finds many expressions that have been transformed — from "on the 19th" to "Wednesday", "in the 47th year of the Showa era" to "in 1972" and "at the beginning of April" to "next month", for instance. It is easy to imagine that the "message transforming function" must have been performed — as Westley and MacLean pointed out — "to B<sup>2</sup>'s need, satisfaction or problem solutions or to contain meanings shared with B<sup>2</sup>".

(In Japan, Emperor Taisho died in 1926 and the present Emperor acceded to the throne. Japan has since been in the Showa era. Emperor Hirochito was born on April 29, 1901, and after World War II, he became "the symbol of Japan and of the unity of the people of Japan" as stipulated in the new Constitution.)

Another noteworthy point is that the *Asahi Evening News* article has a few expressions not seen in the literal translation — "the official said" in the second sentence, "the official, who asked not to be identified" in the third sentence and "the official said" in the sixth sentence. Such work could be regarded as the gatekeeper's message supplementing function carried out for the same reason as the message transforming function.

The most outstanding function that can be observed in the *AEN* article, however, is a drastic reorganization of the message. The literal translation, which faithfully followed the Japanese-language paragraph structure, has only two paragraphs, the first paragraph having three sentences and the second one five sentences. In this connection, the writer wishes to quote a Japanese-language scholar, Shigehiko Toyama, who said in his book *Nihongo no ronri* (*Logic in the Japanese Language*) that in writing most Japanese are not even conscious of paragraphs ... in marked contrast to Western people, who use paragraphs as units of thought.

The reorganization work is not limited to paragraph restructuring. Only part of the *Evening News* article was a literal translation and, as a result, there is no doubt that the *AEN* article is much easier to understand as long as we read it in English. Take the lead in the literal translation, for instance. The 58-word lead is certainly difficult to understand with so many facts crowded together. It is — as Charnley notes in *Reporting* — "long, heavy and confusing". It could be called the "clothesline lead" that was reportedly popular before the war. If written in Japanese, however, the lead is not so difficult to understand. The lead indeed sounds quite natural, although it could be written more simply even in Japanese. The *Asahi Evening News* staff, however, drastically reorganized the original lead, deleting some points, transferring or downgrading some points to the second or third sentence and even changing the subject — the "who" element — from the "Foreign Ministry" to the "Japan Foundation".

Such large-scale message manipulation certainly goes beyond the work of mere translation. The four gatekeeping functions of controlling, transforming, supplementing and reorganizing messages — the work that we have observed in news translation in Japan — could well elevate the status of an English-language news reporter from that of a translator to at least that of a "copy desk".