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La traduction au Japon : l'effet cassette

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Japan has always exhibited a serious attitude towards the translation of foreign languages. Any discussion of this issue must take into account the fact that ancient Japan borrowed Chinese characters, called *kanji*, from China. In this paper, I will focus on the use of *kanji* in translation, which has rarely been discussed in Western Translation Studies. Since ancient times, the Japanese have read imported books written in *kanji* according to a method called *kundoku*, which is still used for reading Western languages in modern Japan. *Kanji* was also used for writing the Japanese language.

This article deals primarily with examples of *kanji* used to translate Western words. Cultures that use *kanji*, including Japan, have long trusted its expressive ability, which is why Japanese translators used this so-called ideogram. In modern times, Japanese translators have used *kanji* to express the meanings of Western words. Of course, this type of usage has its limits when trying to express meanings from other cultures. On the other hand, this method of translation is fairly efficient: although people reading a *kanji* may not at first understand its full meaning, they perhaps feel that it has a serious meaning that can be roughly understood from its context. I call the assumption of meaning triggered by *kanji* the “cassette effect.”

Translation in Japan: The Cassette Effect

Akira Yanabu

The Tradition of *Kanji* Coinage

The Japanese attitude towards foreign translation has always been a fairly serious one. A significant illustration of this attitude is the borrowing of Chinese characters, called *kanji*.

There are two aspects to this discussion. The first, *kundoku* (訓読), involves the adoption of Japanese word order and the addition of Japanese particles, practices still used for reading Western languages in Japan today. The second aspect is *kanji* coinage, particularly when translating Western words. In this article, I will deal mostly with the latter.

The use of letters or characters typically marks the beginning of human civilizations. It therefore follows that Japanese civilization began with its acceptance of Chinese and Korean *kanji*.

When the people of the *Yamato* period accepted *kanji*, did they view it as a useful instrument? Perhaps not. *Kanji* might have been seen as the manifestation of a quite curious thing. About 2,000 years ago, in the *Yayoi* era, bronze mirror products were imported from China or Korea. The island people imitated these products and engraved on them forms resembling *kanji*; however, the right and left sides of some of the *kanji* characters were reversed. At that time, although the people of *Yamato* Japan did not understand what *kanji* were, they treated these objects with great reverence. Another example is the iron

sword, inscribed with a number of *kanji*, discovered at the old mound in *Inariyama*. What did the sword and *kanji* mean to the original owner? Since the sword was buried, it was probably not an instrument of war. Also, the *kanji*, carefully engraved on the iron sword buried in the grave, were never afterwards meant to be seen by human eyes and therefore were not necessarily a means of expression or communication. However, both the sword and the *kanji* were treated with reverence as sacred objects.

Letters or characters were regarded in the same way in other parts of the world in ancient times. But in Japan, *kanji* retained this function rather than evolving into a phonogram-like alphabet largely because *kanji* was imported as an emblem of the advanced Chinese civilization. It is from this perspective that I will deal with the “cassette effect” of translated words.

One Word Composed of Two *Kanji*

Kanji was not only used to communicate Chinese meanings, but to express and communicate Japanese meanings as well. In the 7th century, the government of *Yamato* ordered that the name of every district should consist of two *kanji*. This explains how the geographical names *Yamato* (大和) and *Izumo* (出雲), etc., were created. For example, the name *Ki no kuni* (木の国: *ki* country) was changed to *Kii no kuni* (紀伊の国: *kii* country) using two *kanji*, *ki* and *i*. The names of people also began to be expressed using two *kanji*. Even today, many Japanese family names are composed of two *kanji*, such as *Tanaka* (田中) or *Suzuki* (鈴木), in contrast to Chinese and Korean names like *Li* (李) or *Kim* (金).

Not only were the names of people and districts expressed in two *kanji*, many other *kanji* terms used in Japan were coined in the same way. In China, the native country of *kanji*, the general rule is that one character expresses one word. However, in Japan, two characters are often used to express one word. What caused this difference? First, Japanese *kanji* had to be distinguished from Chinese. Second, the new *kanji* word had to be distinguished from the traditional Japanese word. For instance, in the sentence, *Honyaku ha bunka no sôzô da* (翻訳は文化の創造だ: Translation is the creation of culture), written in the traditional Japanese

language called *Yamatokotoba*, *ha* (は), *no* (の) and *da* (だ) are each read as one vocal sound. However, the *kanji* for *honyaku* (翻訳), *bunka* (文化) and *sózó* (創造) are read as three or four vocal sounds which make one unit of meaning in one Japanese word.

Japanese has thus become a language of double structure, namely, *kanji* together with traditional *Yamatokotoba*. Perhaps every Japanese person intuitively understands the difference between the two, though it might be very difficult to discern for foreigners. This shares some characteristics with Antoine Berman's "superimposition of language" in the difficulty of translation (Berman, 2000, pp. 296-297).

Kanji words are usually nouns, verbs or adjectives. Therefore, it is important to properly differentiate these functions. Because differentiation is important, some Japanese *kanji* words have even distanced themselves from their own meaning, in other words, the form of a two-*kanji* word is sometimes more important than its meaning. For instance, while *ki no kuni* (木の国: country of trees) has a specific meaning, *kii no kuni* (紀伊の国: country of *kii*) has no specific meaning at all. Thus, the form of a *kanji* word is in some cases more important than its meaning: this principle holds true in today's Japan when *kanji* words are coined for translation.

For example, the *kanji* word *tetsugaku* (哲学) is the translation of "philosophy" in Japan today. However, Nishi Amane (西周), who originally translated the word, coined *kitetsugaku* (希哲学). The first *kanji*, *ki* (希), means "hope," and corresponded to the "phil" in "philosophy." Nishi Amane knew that "phil" was important for "philosophy" because Socrates added "phil" or "love" to "sophy" to say that his philosophy was different from the learning of the sophists (Nishi, 1981, pp. 16-17). Soon after, *kitetsugaku* (希哲学) was changed to *tetsugaku* (哲学): the important idea of *ki* (希) or "phil" was dropped due to the dominance of the two-*kanji* form.

Another example is the *kanji* word *keizai* (経済), which is the translation of "economy" in Japan today. At the beginning of the modern era, this was coined as *keseisaimin* (経世済民), which

roughly corresponded to the meaning of “economy.” However, two of the four *kanji* characters were then dropped, and *keiseisaimin* (経世済民) became the two-*kanji* word *keizai* (経済) translation of “economy.” Today, many Japanese people cannot draw the meaning of “economy” from the *kanji* word *keizai*. How, then, can they understand this word? They do not understand it through the *kanji*, but rather through knowledge of the definition learnt at school, or from their perception of its context. In many cases, the *kanji* word is only a sort of clue to understanding its meaning.

Kanji is sometimes said to be a sort of ideogram, as opposed to the notion of an alphabet as a set of phonograms. However, some philologists criticize the concepts of ideogram and phonogram as ambiguous. The *kanji* translation of words in Japan clearly shows the definition of ideogram to be especially suspect.

Clearly, a Japanese *kanji* constitutes a unique type of ideogram. Many Japanese *kanji* and Chinese characters express their meaning effectively. Particularly when used to represent material things, they can be said to be ideograms. However, we are referring here to cases of translation. Thus when *kanji* are used to express words from foreign cultures, academic technical terms in particular, their function as ideograms is very ineffective and unclear. The reason *kanji* has been used to translate words since the beginning of modern Japan is historical: the Japanese have relied heavily upon *kanji* since ancient times. Since it was first adopted, the Japanese have used *kanji* for almost every specialized or difficult concept: there are approximately 50,000 *kanji* words in the largest dictionary. The Japanese have structured *kanji* so that it can express every meaning in the world, and the belief in this capacity is important. When Japanese readers, young people or students in particular, look at *kanji* words like *tetsugaku* (哲学) or *keizai* (経済), they assume that there must be a serious meaning in these *kanji* words. They assume that, although they cannot understand the meaning very well, there must be important meaning contained in the depth of these *kanji*.

The Cassette Effect

We have called this tendency to assume meaning the “cassette effect.” The original meaning of a cassette is a jewel box: small, beautiful, something that by definition contains a treasure. But it is only a box. The exterior hides the interior. This inability to know leads people to assume that there must be something splendid inside (Yanabu, 1976, pp. 1-60).

The cassette effect has created a structure of double discrimination, first, between source-language writer and the translator in Japan, and second, between the Japanese translator and Japanese readers in general. This double discrimination is similar to the post-colonial structure of translation explained by Vanamala Viswanatha and Sherry Simon (1999, p. 173).

In the long history of accepting *kanji* in Japan, the cassette effect has been observed in a variety of situations, not only when reading *kanji*, but also when listening to texts read aloud. When monks read out the *kanji* sutras during Buddhist ceremonies, many Japanese believers do not understand them. Because they do not understand, the faithful bow all the more deeply when listening to the reading. Even today, this behaviour can be observed in almost every Buddhist temple in Japan.

The same phenomenon can be seen in the daily lives of modern Japanese. In TV commercials, phrases incomprehensible to most viewers are repeatedly heard, such as “Taurine 1000 milligram is combined!” What is “Taurine”? There are very few viewers indeed who are familiar with this term, which makes it seem all the more beneficial to their health. The producers of these commercials might well be familiar with the “cassette effect.”

This phenomenon is present not only in language, but also in various other cultural objects. Rare items imported from foreign countries seem splendid to Japanese people, and expensive things are all the more attractive to them. It is said that expensive Western brands are the biggest sellers in Japan.

In some way, the cassette effect is useful for the acceptance of foreign languages, cultural elements and objects. It has helped the Japanese to accept foreignness even if they do not understand it. The Japanese have, since ancient times, imported and accepted foreign things with great zeal.

The Cassette Effect as a Universal Phenomenon

Thus far, I have dealt with the cassette effect in relation to the function of language and culture in Japan. The same phenomenon can be found throughout the world when different languages or cultures come into contact. The relationship between *kanji* and the Japanese language is in fact quite similar to that between Latin or Greek and modern Western languages.

For example, many academic technical terms are derived from Latin and Greek, terms which are particularly difficult especially for the general public, and which are intentionally used by scholars. One researcher wondered whether “Translation Studies” should be named “Translatology” (Munday, 2001, p. 10). His reasoning was that it should be so named if the field gained wider recognition. Western people tend to believe that adding “logy” to a term associates it with a higher degree of education or learning.

Another example of the cassette effect can be seen among American students during their second, or “sophomore” year in college. When these students enter university and start learning difficult technical terms, they begin using them with immoderate preference. This is called the “sophomoric” cassette effect.

A famous case of professional mischief, involving Professor Alan Sokal, also serves as an example. In 1996, Professor Sokal wrote an article in which he used some difficult French philosophical terms as well as some specialized physics formulas and published it in a famous academic journal. The article became the subject of rumour among intellectuals, and after a while, Sokal confessed that the terms and formulas were pure nonsense. Naturally, no one ought to have been able to understand the content; however, because it was published in

an academic journal, the article was taken seriously. It is thus a perfect example of the “cassette effect.”

However, the cassette effect can have a natural and positive effect on civilization. When different languages or cultures come into contact, people usually cannot fully understand the foreign element, which typically seems slightly incomprehensible or strange at the beginning of the encounter. Mutual understanding begins with incomprehensibility and is achieved with the rejection of the idea of incomprehensibility. The problem of the encounter with the foreign ought to be seen from this perspective, where translation problems usually begin.

The scientific method tends to rely on comprehensible hypotheses and concrete aims; translation, however, begins with an unknown object. The cassette effect is generally incidental to the encounter with a foreign object or element. After the initial encounter, people gradually come to comprehend the unknown. But what has been understood in this fashion may not always be identical to the meaning of the original. A full understanding of foreignness is very difficult, regardless of the time spent in its pursuit. Therefore, though one may believe to have understood the foreign, one might have created an entirely other meaning. For example, in ancient times, the Roman Catholic Church believed itself to be the inheritor of original Christianity; later, in the Renaissance, Luther believed the same of himself, which resulted in the creation of the highly distinct faiths of Catholicism and Protestantism.

In our increasingly globalized world, where the opportunities for encounters between foreign languages and cultures are growing rapidly, the path to understanding, which begins with the unknown object, proves to be ever more important.

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ABSTRACT: Translation in Japan: The Cassette Effect
— Japan has always exhibited a serious attitude towards the translation of foreign languages. Any discussion of this issue must take into account the fact that ancient Japan borrowed Chinese characters, called *kanji*, from China. In this paper, I will focus on the use of *kanji* in translation, which has rarely been discussed in

Western Translation Studies. Since ancient times, the Japanese have read imported books written in *kanji* according to a method called *kundoku*, which is still used for reading Western languages in modern Japan. *Kanji* was also used for writing the Japanese language.

This article deals primarily with examples of *kanji* used to translate Western words. Cultures that use *kanji*, including Japan, have long trusted its expressive ability, which is why Japanese translators used this so-called ideogram. In modern times, Japanese translators have used *kanji* to express the meanings of Western words. Of course, this type of usage has its limits when trying to express meanings from other cultures. On the other hand, this method of translation is fairly efficient: although people reading a *kanji* may not at first understand its full meaning, they perhaps feel that it has a serious meaning that can be roughly understood from its context. I call the assumption of meaning triggered by *kanji* the “cassette effect.”

RÉSUMÉ : La traduction au Japon : l'effet cassette — Le Japon a toujours accordé beaucoup d'importance à la traduction des langues étrangères. Toute analyse de la traduction au Japon doit prendre en compte le fait que le Japon de l'époque ancienne a emprunté à la Chine les caractères appelés *kanji*. Cet article porte plus précisément sur l'usage des *kanji* comme outils de traduction, sujet qui n'a que très rarement été abordé par la traductologie occidentale. Depuis l'époque ancienne, les Japonais ont lu les livres importés écrits en *kanji* à l'aide de la méthode appelée *kundoku*, qui est encore utilisée par le Japon moderne pour la lecture des langues occidentales.

Cet article aborde essentiellement des exemples de *kanji* utilisés pour traduire les langues occidentales. Les cultures qui se servent des *kanji*, y compris le Japon, ont très tôt apprécié leur capacité d'expression, et celle-ci a poussé les traducteurs japonais à utiliser ces prétendus idéogrammes. À l'époque moderne, les traducteurs japonais ont eu recours aux *kanji* afin d'exprimer le sens des mots des langues occidentales. Bien entendu, cet usage des *kanji* a ses limites lorsqu'il s'agit d'exprimer des idées liées à d'autres cultures. Toutefois, cette méthode de traduction est plutôt efficace : bien que ceux qui lisent un *kanji* peuvent ne pas comprendre immédiatement la totalité de sa signification, ils

perçoivent probablement qu'il a un sens important qui peut être déduit du contexte. J'appelle l'assomption d'un sens engendrée par le *kanji* l'« effet cassette ».

Keywords: Chinese characters, *kanji*, *kundoku*, one word composed of two *kanji*, cassette effect

Mots-clés : caractères chinois, *kanji*, *kundoku*, mot composé de deux *kanji*, effet cassette

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