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Translating “Nation” into Japanese during the Modernization of Japan: Dynamics of Translation as a Social and Interactional Practice

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This paper focuses on the translation of the term “nation” into Japanese during the Meiji era (1868-1912), drawing on the framework of sociosemiotic anthropology that explores the dynamics of translation practice as an interaction occurring in sociocultural and historical contexts. The discussion revisits the roles played by translation in the modernization of Japan.

During the late 20th century, in an increasingly globalized world, Western scholars, including Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, criticized the terms “nation” or “nation state” as historical constructs of modernization. However, in Japan, the discussion regarding the notion of “nation” always leads to an inevitable problem. In Japanese, there is no single word that can represent the Western concept of “nation.” There are mainly two translations of “nation”: *kokumin* and *minzoku*. Both terms were kanji compounds created by either borrowing a word of Chinese origin or combining two kanji, as was done with many other translated words in the early Meiji era. These two terms have coexisted and competed provoking significant confusion in academic fields and translation practices. The problem has usually been attributed to the impossibility of translating between different cultures or to translator’s incompetence. Thus, the dynamics of translation as a social practice barely receive any attention.

This study aims at clarifying the reasons behind the repeated occurrence of such confusion, and shows that while *kokumin* was adopted to express the English or French concept of “nation” at the predawn of Japan’s modernization, *minzoku* – representing the German *Volk* – appeared in the middle of the Meiji era. Moreover, both translations and their acceptance by people blended with the political, ideological, sociocultural, and historical elements that surrounded translation in this period. Japan’s increasing interest in the territorial expansion in East Asia and its simultaneous struggle to unify the Japanese people as *kokumin* were crucial aspects of Japan’s sociocultural and historical context in this period.

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