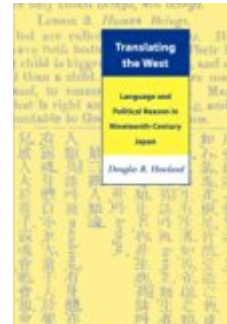


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Douglas R. Howland. *Translating the West: Language and Political Reason in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. Xiv + 292 pp. \$56.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2462-4.

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## Are we certain that we know what our words mean?

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The title of this review is drawn from the conclusion (p.184) to Howland's book about how western political concepts were introduced into the Japanese language during the Meiji period, and it neatly encapsulates the central focus of his work. Howland claims that many historians writing about political ideas in Japan have assumed that "a word is a word is a word", and if the Japanese used e.g. the word *jiyuu* at a particular moment in time, they meant "liberty"—no more, no less. His books show abundantly that such an assumption is a gross simplification.

*Translating the West* starts out with a long introduction setting out the parameters for the study. Howland outlines his project, which is to analyze the intellectual dynamics in the debate among Japanese scholars and intellectuals who conceptualized the process of modernization and civilization. The new vocabulary needed in this process in the early years after the Meiji Restoration came mainly from English, and its introduction into a Japanese context was not a one-time event, but rather the result of trial and error and several contesting viewpoints. To analyze how this process played out, Howland employs terminology and concepts from semiotics (transcoding material from one linguistic context to another), pragmatics (meaning is constituted through usage), Begriffsgeschichte (concept history), and, of course, from history, which is his main scholarly background. The introduction gives a brief overview of the introduc-

tion of Western learning, presents the Meirokusha intellectual elite, and describes how historians have traditionally treated the *bunmeikaika* ("civilization and enlightenment") process. He also discusses the problem of semantic transparency of foreign concepts, and finally the connections between concept, word, and meaning.

Chapter 2 is devoted to "civilization and enlightenment," and the debates on of how this should be brought about—from above or from below. Japanese intellectuals were well aware that the written language posed a formidable barrier to universal education and popular enlightenment by its archaic forms and complicated characters. Several solutions were proposed, of which the most successful was the movement to shift to writing colloquial rather than classical Japanese. Learning Chinese came under attack as backwards and outdated, but was defended by scholars of Chinese and eventually remained alive and well. Howland points to the important role played by the Chinese characters in mediating between Japan and the West in terms of translation. Rather than borrowing foreign words and incorporating them as loanwords, in most cases the Japanese preferred to avail themselves of the infinite possibilities for semantic extensions or neologisms present in the Chinese characters. Apart from this practical consideration, learning Chinese helped fill the moral and ethical vacuum perceived as resulting from the excessive new materialism.

Chapter 3 concentrates on translation techniques and how the transcoding of Western terms transformed the

Japanese language (like Chinese had done from the fifth century onwards). The majority of the new words were coined with the help of Chinese characters. Often different choices were made by different translators or even by the same translator over time. Only later were *katakana* brought in to help, and the first attempts at formal standardization of common terms began in the 1880s. Actual standardization took place through the repeated usage of specific terms, which gradually brought some consensus, and a more widespread understanding of their meanings. Of course, the fact that the meanings of many terms were contested in their language of origin did not make the task easier. Howland operates with two analytical constructs, authenticity and accessibility, with regard to the translators' task: the former gives priority to the original text and attempts a close and exact translation as far as possible, while the latter prioritizes the Japanese target audience and changes the original text as necessary to ensure understanding. Several developments further helped to provide accessibility of the translated texts, such as the introduction of punctuation and development of printing techniques that made it possible to mark loanwords in the text for easy recognition.

With these preliminaries behind him, Howland proceeds to analyze in detail the history of the concept and translation of three key terms between the 1860s and the 1890s, namely "liberty", "rights" (*ken* as used to represent rights, privilege, power, authority, and sovereignty), and "society". He traces their interpretations in the West, as well as the many different uses they were put to by different people and in different contexts. The three chapters devoted to these terms are impressive in terms of the meticulousness with which each term is traced in the writings of the time, and in terms of providing the historical context necessary to understand the different usages. In the conclusion, Howland refers to the difficulty inherent in grasping particular meanings of terms at a particular time in the face of the general fluidity of language, and he briefly discusses another key term of the period, namely "nation".

One third of Howland's book (100 pages) is taken up by endnotes, glossary, bibliography and index, of which the endnotes constitute more than half. This is a testimony to the enormous amount of research behind the study and the diverse interdisciplinary background of the author. To linguists and anthropologists the interconnectedness of language and culture is hardly a new discovery, and they are generally well aware of the "double bind" inherent in translation: every culture has concepts, which do not have easily available equivalents in another

language. If you translate them anyway, you are stuck with a less than optimal equivalent. If, as many prefer to do, you leave them in the original language and attach a longish explanation the first time it occurs, you may be criticized for needless mystification of a foreign concept. Howland may at times seem overly impressed with his own discovery of the cultural boundness of abstract concepts, but this in no way detracts from the significance and usefulness of his work.

To this reviewer who has a background in Japanese Studies and an interest in translation, the main contributions of *Translating the West* lie in two attributes: Firstly, it is written from a historian's point of view with the fruitful addition of a good grounding in semiotics and the history of ideas, and, secondly, in its thorough empirical specificity, namely the translation problems encountered by the Japanese intellectual elite, who translated and introduced Western liberal concepts to Japan between 1860 and 1890.

However, while reading, however I found myself wondering how other target groups might perceive this book. The cover text claims that the book will interest scholars of East Asian Studies, translation studies, and historians of political thought. Knowledge of the Japanese language is therefore not a prerequisite for readers. Indeed, non-Japanese speakers can enjoy a detailed explanation of what a syllabic alphabet is (p. 47). It seems, nevertheless, difficult to imagine what scholars, who do not know Japanese, can gain from this book if they are not already familiar with Japan at least to the extent of knowing what syllabic writing is.

For those who know Japanese well, there is a curious contradiction inherent in the fact that by choosing to write the book such that it is readable to people with no knowledge of Japanese, Howland gets into the same quandary as the Japanese intellectuals of whom he writes. Namely, he has to represent Japanese translation words for English concepts, in English. This kind of "back-translation" is quite frustrating for the reader who knows Japanese and would dearly like to know what the Japanese word in question was. Thus, when Howland quotes Nishi Amane's ponderings over the difficulties of translating Joseph Haven's *Mental Philosophy* and writes that Amane created neologisms for words "such as "reason", "sensibility", "sense", and "understanding", this reader cannot help wondering what words Amane actually created in Japanese for these terms (pp. 82-83). The "Glossary of Translation Words" beginning on p. 249 is not much help in this context, since it contains only

Japanese words in Roman letters and characters.

Howland maintains a sometimes uneven balance between writing for historians, with no specific knowledge of Japan (or Japanese), and writing for specialists in East Asia or in translation studies. Each of these groups will definitely gain something from the book, but in its totality, it may only genuinely appeal to other scholars specializing in the Meiji period.

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