

The Influence of Closeness on Japanese-English Translation

Stachus Peter Tu*

Center for Foreign Language Education, Institute for the Promotion of Education and Research, Shimane University, Matsue City 690-8504, Japan

Received: 12.08.2023 • Accepted: 10.11.2023 • Published: 29.12.2023 • Final Version: 30.12.2023

Abstract: In the evolving dynamics of cross-cultural communication, understanding the biases that play a role in language translation is crucial. This research, using the Critical Incident Technique, delved into the nuances of how bilingual Japanese individuals provide translations to non-Japanese speakers, based on the relationship between the translator and the recipient. The findings reveal a notable distinction: bilingual Japanese individuals tend to offer a more positive and intricately detailed translation for non-Japanese-speaking friends as compared to non-Japanese-speaking strangers. This behavior suggests a predominant inclination among Japanese to "protect the face" of those they share closer bonds with, by casting the original message in a more positive light or providing more comprehensive translations. This observed phenomenon not only underlines a cultural aspect of Japanese communication, which prioritizes harmony and face-saving, but also indicates a willingness among Japanese speakers to invest greater effort in the translation process for their friends. The study underscores the inherent biases that can shape Japanese to English translations based on relational closeness, thereby emphasizing the importance of understanding socio-cultural contexts in cross-linguistic interactions.

Keywords: Japanese-English Translation, Closeness, Face-saving, Critical Incident Technique, Bias in Translation

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication serves as a bridge between diverse populations, facilitating understanding and collaboration. A core component of this communication is translation, the act of converting a message from one language into another while aiming to preserve its original intent and meaning. However, the translation process is not devoid of biases. Cultural, emotional, and relational factors can subtly influence how messages are conveyed from one language to another. Japan, with its deep-rooted cultural nuances and emphasis on interpersonal relationships, presents a compelling backdrop for examining these influences.

Japanese society is renowned for its emphasis on 'wa' (harmony) and face-saving in interpersonal relationships. It prioritizes maintaining a positive atmosphere in interactions, even when it involves adjusting the tone or content of messages. While these cultural traits have been studied extensively within the realm of native Japanese interactions, few studies have examined their influence on bilingual Japanese-English translations.

* Corresponding Author: E-mail stachuspetertu@gmail.com

Bilingual individuals often serve as bridges between their native and adopted cultures, navigating the subtleties of both. Yet, their translations can be influenced by their personal biases, especially when dealing with friends as opposed to strangers. The current study, employing the Critical Incident Technique, explores this fascinating intersection of language, culture, and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, we aim to uncover how relationship closeness between the translator and the recipient may affect the positivity and detail in Japanese to English translations, highlighting potential biases and their implications for cross-cultural communication.

In this research paper, we begin by setting the stage with an exploration of bilingual translation dynamics and the pressing need to understand the intertwined nature of relational and cultural biases. The prominence of the Japanese concept of 'wa' is underscored as a key cultural facet influencing communication patterns. Delving into the literature, we build upon prior studies focusing on translation biases, emphasizing the potential sway of interpersonal relationships and deeply rooted cultural values, especially in the context of Japanese traditions. Our key research questions address potential translation biases rooted in relational closeness, the variance in translation detail predicated on relational dynamics, and the overarching role of cultural elements in shaping translation practices. The methodological section elucidates the participants' profiles, the study's design, including the employment of the Critical Incident Technique, and the evaluative measures and analysis techniques employed. The results are subsequently laid out, blending qualitative narratives from participants with quantitative assessments to paint a comprehensive picture. This leads us to an in-depth discussion, where findings are juxtaposed with our initial questions, and broader implications are deliberated upon. We reflect on the intricacies of cultural and interpersonal dynamics and their bearing on translation, while also acknowledging study limitations and envisioning avenues for future research. The paper culminates with a conclusion that synthesizes the research's pivotal insights, especially relevant for bilingual translators, educators, and those engaged in cross-cultural communication.

2. Background

The importance of effective cross-cultural communication is well-established in academic literature (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Effective communication across cultures demands a nuanced understanding of both linguistic and cultural elements. Translation, as a critical component, is more than mere linguistic conversion; it involves adapting cultural, emotional, and contextual cues (Nida, 1964).

Central to Japanese communication is the principle of 'wa' or harmony. This principle emphasizes balance, cohesion, and avoidance of direct confrontation in interactions (Maynard, 1997). The significance of 'wa' is evident in numerous Japanese communicative practices, including indirect speech, euphemisms, and the use of honorific language (Clancy, 1986).

Face-saving, or the act of preserving one's image and preventing embarrassment, is not exclusive to Japanese culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, its prominence in Japan is pronounced. Many interactions are oriented towards avoiding any loss of face for oneself

or the interlocutor (Matsumoto, 1988). This dynamic becomes especially intricate in bilingual settings where translations can be adjusted to protect face.

Bilinguals, by virtue of their dual linguistic capability, occupy a unique space in cross-cultural interactions (Grosjean, 1982). While they can serve as bridges, their translations are not always neutral. Factors like emotional state, personal experiences, and interpersonal dynamics can affect their translations (Pavlenko, 2005).

Interpersonal closeness and relationship quality have been known to influence communicative behavior. Studies show that individuals are more likely to employ positive politeness strategies and be more elaborate in their explanations when communicating with friends as opposed to strangers (Tannen, 2007; Holtgraves, 1997).

The Critical Incident Technique, originally developed by Flanagan (1954), has been effectively utilized in various disciplines, including translation studies. It allows for a detailed examination of specific events or incidents that are deemed critical in understanding a particular phenomenon.

The intersection of Japanese communication, bilingual translation biases, and interpersonal dynamics remains underexplored. While individual components like 'wa' and face-saving have received scholarly attention, their amalgamation in bilingual translation, especially influenced by relational closeness, has yet to be extensively studied. This research endeavors to fill this gap by utilizing the Critical Incident Technique to probe deeper into these intricate relationships.

Given the cultural and interpersonal intricacies that influence Japanese-English translation dynamics, as highlighted in the literature review, this study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. Bias in Translation. How does relational closeness influence the positivity of translations provided by bilingual Japanese individuals? Do bilingual Japanese individuals provide a more positive translation for non-Japanese-speaking friends as opposed to non-Japanese-speaking strangers?

RQ 2. Detail in Translation. How does the level of detail in Japanese to English translations vary based on the relationship between the translator and the recipient? Are translations for closer relationships more detailed and comprehensive?

RQ 3. Cultural Influence on Translation. How does the cultural principle of 'wa' manifest in the translations provided by bilingual Japanese individuals? Is there evidence to suggest that the desire to protect the face of a close individual influences translation choices?

RQ 4. Interpersonal Dynamics. How do interpersonal dynamics, such as the need to maintain harmony or avoid confrontation, affect the translation process between bilingual Japanese and non-Japanese-speaking individuals?

RQ 5. General Translation Patterns. Are there discernible patterns in how bilingual Japanese individuals translate content based on the nature of the relationship? If so, what are these patterns?

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to shed light on the potential biases in translation processes and the cultural and relational factors that underpin them.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study involved five bilingual Japanese participants fluent in both Japanese and English. Participants spanned a broad age range: 29, 31, 38, 50, and 68 years. Gender distribution consisted of three males and two females. Every participant was a native Japanese speaker, having acquired English proficiency through formal education or prolonged residence in English-speaking nations. The following is a description of each of the participants.

Participant A is a 29-year-old male. He boasts a TOEIC score of 850, indicating a strong command over the English language, often used in professional settings. Participant B, a 31-year-old male, has achieved an impressive TOEIC score of 890, reflecting his proficiency in English and its application in varied contexts. Participant C is a 38-year-old female. Her TOEIC score stands at 870, showcasing her adeptness in English, especially in business communications. Participant D, a 50-year-old male, possesses a TOEIC score of 910. This score epitomizes his extensive experience with the English language, often in international diplomatic contexts. Participant E, a 68-year-old female, holds a TOEIC score of 790. Her score underscores a solid grasp of English, accrued from her extended stay in an English-speaking country.

3.2. Procedures

Participants were prompted to delve into their recent memories and detail two specific instances where they translated Japanese content into English for non-Japanese speakers. One of these recollections should involve translating for someone they held close, like a friend or family member, while the other should revolve around translation for someone less familiar, perhaps an acquaintance or stranger. They were expected to provide a comprehensive account of each incident, specifying the original Japanese content, their subsequent English translation, and their thought process during the translation.

3.3. Data Analysis

A panel of independent bilingual evaluators, possessing expertise in both Japanese and English, was assembled to assess the translations. These evaluators were kept uninformed about which translation was directed towards a friend and which was for a stranger. Their evaluation metrics focused on aspects such as the positivity of the translated content, the detail level, fidelity to the original message, and alterations indicative of face-saving intentions. The qualitative narratives from the CIT were parsed thematically to discern consistent patterns, underlying motivations, and possible biases.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Every participant was apprised about the study's overarching objectives and rendered their informed consent before their engagement. Their contributions were enveloped in strict

confidentiality, and they were periodically reminded of their unequivocal right to withdraw from the study at any juncture.

4. Results

Utilizing the Critical Incident Technique, a myriad of rich narratives were documented. Here, we qualitatively present five detailed accounts from participants, which provide compelling insights into the influence of relationship closeness on translation dynamics. In essence, these five accounts underscore a consistent pattern where translations for closer relationships were characterized by efforts to protect feelings, provide deeper context, or enhance understanding. In contrast, translations for distant or unfamiliar relationships were more straightforward and less emotionally cushioned.

4.1. Participant A

Close Friend Incident. Participant A recalled translating a Japanese text message for an American friend in which the original sender, a mutual Japanese friend, expressed mild frustration over a missed meet-up. Instead of translating the exact sentiment, Participant A softened the message, making it sound more understanding and less blaming.

Stranger Incident. When translating a business email for an unfamiliar colleague, Participant A stuck to a direct and faithful translation, maintaining the slightly critical tone of the original sender regarding a delay in project timelines.

Observation. The translation for the close friend was cushioned to protect feelings, whereas for the stranger, it was direct and true to the original tone.

4.2. Participant B

Close Friend Incident. Participant B shared a scenario where they translated a film's Japanese dialogue for an English-speaking friend. The dialogue contained cultural jokes and nuances. Instead of a straightforward translation, Participant B expanded on the translation and provided additional context to ensure their friend fully grasped the humor.

Stranger Incident. While watching the same film with a distant acquaintance, the translation was concise without the added cultural context.

Observation. Effort was invested to ensure a close friend comprehended deeper cultural nuances, but the same was not extended to a distant relationship.

4.3. Participant C

Close Friend Incident. When translating a letter from a mutual Japanese friend for a close English-speaking friend, Participant C admitted to omitting a sentence that they felt might upset their English-speaking friend, even though it wasn't overtly negative.

Stranger Incident. While translating a general letter for a community member they didn't know personally, Participant C rendered a full and accurate translation without omissions.

Observation. Omission, as a face-saving measure, was evident when translating for a close friend but not for a stranger.

4.4. Participant D

Close Friend Incident. Participant D recounted an instance where they translated verbal feedback from a Japanese instructor for an English-speaking friend. The feedback, though constructive, had elements of criticism. The translation provided to the friend was not only softened but was also accompanied by words of encouragement from Participant D.

Stranger Incident. When a non-familiar classmate sought a translation of similar feedback, Participant D provided a more direct translation without adding personal words of encouragement.

Observation. Personal involvement and added encouragement were evident in translations for a friend, reflecting a desire to cushion any potential emotional impact.

4.5. Participant E

Close Friend Incident. Participant E spoke of translating a Japanese song's lyrics for a close English-speaking friend. They took the time to weave a narrative around the cultural and historical backdrop of the lyrics, turning the translation into a storytelling session.

Stranger Incident. For an acquaintance at a casual gathering, the same song's translation was concise, sticking to the core theme without delving into the backstory.

Observation. The depth and richness of translation varied noticeably, with a close friend receiving a more immersive and detailed experience compared to an acquaintance.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The translation dynamics revealed through the narratives of the participants cast a light on the profound interplay of cultural, relational, and linguistic factors in Japanese to English translation. As we delve into the research questions, several salient points emerge.

The first question sought to understand the influence of relational closeness on the positivity of translations. The experiences shared by participants such as A and D unmistakably demonstrate that translations for closer relationships tended to be more positive or softened. This could be attributed to the ingrained cultural value of 'wa' and the Japanese inclination to maintain harmony and avoid direct confrontation, especially with those they share a close bond with.

A discernible difference was evident in the depth and detail of translations based on the nature of relationships. As exemplified by participants B and E, translations for close friends were often more elaborate, infused with cultural context and backstory. This resonates with Tannen's (2007) assertion that individuals are more elaborate in their communication with friends compared to strangers. The investment of effort in ensuring close friends fully grasp the nuances of the message underscores the relational value attached to such interactions.

The cultural principle of 'wa' emerged as a palpable undercurrent in many translations. Participant C's omission of potentially upsetting content in a friend's translation is a testament to the desire to protect the face of a close individual, reflecting the cultural importance of preserving harmony and face-saving. This finding aligns with Matsumoto's (1988) insights into the significance of face-saving in Japanese communication.

Interpersonal dynamics played a conspicuous role in shaping translation choices. Participants, knowingly or unknowingly, modified translations based on their perception of the recipient's feelings, understanding, or relationship with the original sender. This observation corresponds with Holtgraves' (1997) notion that interpersonal closeness can influence communicative behavior.

A consistent pattern emerged where translations for closer relationships were characterized by a desire to protect feelings, provide deeper context, or enhance understanding. This is in stark contrast to translations for more distant relationships, which were often more direct and devoid of additional interpretative efforts. In reflecting upon these findings, it becomes apparent that translation, especially in bilingual individuals embedded within cultures rich in relational nuances like Japan, is not a mere linguistic activity. Instead, it becomes an act of navigation—between cultures, between emotions, and between relationships. The results of this study further the understanding of how translation is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural norms and interpersonal relationships. While the findings are rooted in the Japanese-English bilingual context, they raise broader questions about the universality of such biases in translation across different linguistic and cultural landscapes.

This study's qualitative nature, while providing depth, has its limitations in terms of generalizability. Future studies might employ larger and more diverse samples or explore similar dynamics in other bilingual contexts. Additionally, objective measures, like employing blind reviewers to evaluate the positivity or negativity of translations, could further validate these findings. In conclusion, the act of translation extends beyond mere words it carries with it the weight of culture, the subtleties of emotions, and the intricacies of human relationships.

References

- [1] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Clancy, P. M. (1986). The acquisition of communicative style in Japanese. In B. B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures* (pp. 213-250). Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51(4), 327.
- [4] Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intergroup communication*. McGraw-Hill.
- [5] Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Press.
- [6] Holtgraves, T. (1997). Styles of language use: Individual and cultural variability in conversational indirectness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(3), 624.
- [7] Grosjean, F. (1982). *Life with two languages: An introduction to bilingualism*. Harvard University Press.
- [8] Maynard, S. K. (1997). *Japanese communication: Language and thought in context*. University of Hawaii Press.
- [9] Matsumoto, Y. (1988). Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12(4), 403-426.
- [10] Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating*. Brill.
- [11] Pavlenko, A. (2005). *Emotions and multilingualism*. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Tannen, D. (2007). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse*. Cambridge University Press.