Fun translating text from Japanese to English

One of my jobs is doing text translations on PC from Japanese to English. I use Google translate in the process, but only as a double check to make sure I didn’t miss any phrases or words. I found Google does a fairly decent job translating Indo-European languages. I studied Russian and discovered that Google is OK to translate texts such as emails in Russian. An example from Bible text of Matthew 5:9

> Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

The Russian Bible says:

> Блаженны миротворцы, ибо они будут наречены сынами Божиими.

Put that in Google translate and you get:

> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Not bad at all!

The Japanese Bible says:

> 平和をつくり出す人たちは、さいわいである、彼らは神の子と呼ばれるであろう。

Put that in Google translate and you get:

> Build a peaceful people, and fortunately, they shall be called sons of God.

Not nearly as good as the Google translation from Russian.

Here’s an example of a Japanese Paragraph I worked on today. It’s the first paragraph of a friend who is sharing a strange dream she had one night:

> 私の父は類い稀な人生の歩み方をした人だった。彼は娘に多大な影響を与え、私は彼に啓蒙され続け育った。その人が肝臓癌で死んだ。その死に方も又壮絶を極めた。自らの意志でモルヒネ投与を拒否し敢えて痛みに耐えているようだった。その昔、彼が愛したかけがえの無い人を手遅れのガンで亡くした無念さと心の痛みはいつまでも消えなかったようだ。父はガンと宣告されて何度も激痛に見舞われるが末期に至るまでその痛みに正気で耐え彼女の痛みを共有しているように思えた。

Google translation says:

> My father was a person who walks of life extraordinary. He has a great impact on her daughter, I grew up with him continues to be enlightened. The person died of liver cancer. The ultimate in epic also a way to die. He seemed to deliberately refuse to endure the pain by his morphine. Many years ago, lost in sorrow and pain of cancer too late to all the world seems to love him forever. My father seemed to share the pain in her right mind to endure the pain until the end of times suffer severe pain from cancer is diagnosed.

My translation:

> My father lived an extraordinary life. He had a great influence on me. I grew up enlightened with his wisdom. He died of liver cancer. His death was as extraordinary as his life was. He deliberated refused to take morphine and choose to endure pain instead. Many years ago he also lost his one and true love who died of cancer discovered too late. It seems the sadness and pain of her passing never faded from his heart. Ever since my father was diagnosed to have cancer, he seemed to share my mother’s pain and endured severe pain until the very end clinging barely on to his sanity.

Reasons why a machine translator like Google has great difficulty with Japanese sentences:

- Japanese has no verb conjugation and therefore the person speaking cannot be determined by the grammar. It can only be determined by human logic based on the content.
- Japanese is a language of metaphors. Ideas are expressed differently using different words than would be used in most European languages.
- The subject of a Japanese sentence is often dropped because it is supposed to be already understood by the listener.
- Nouns have no gender and the only two pronouns with gender, kare, kanojo (he, she) are often dropped from the sentence when supposed to be understood. And these two pronouns can even be interpreted by the listener as one’s boyfriend or girlfriend according to the context it is used!
- The predicate and main verb of the sentence comes at the very end of the sentence, not immediately after the subject as in English. There may be several clauses in between. A machine translation of a long sentence is often nonsensical.

Back in the mid ’90s I once read an article that predicted by the year 2000, voice machine translators would be so good that a voice of a person in Tokyo speaking in Japanese on the phone would come out in English to the other party in America! I cannot foresee that ever happening when even text only translations are still very poorly done.

I often have to add words not present in the original to my translation because I know that is probably what the person meant to say. In other words, a percentage of the translation is really interpreting what the writer means. It’s only because I know the author personally that I can interpret the author’s text with a good degree of accuracy, something that no machine or software no matter how sophisticated could ever do. Are my translations OK? The author seems to think so. ▯