

# Sentence Structure Translation Issues in Japanese Literary Works

-- Take "Childhood Sweethearts" as an Example

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**Abstract:** Japanese is an SOV-type (i.e. subject-object-verb) language and Chinese is an SVO-type (i.e. subject-verb-object) language. When translating Japanese literary works, we should put aside the habit of using native Chinese according to the SVO-type structure, and instead, according to the contextual background of the original text, take the sentence as the smallest unit, and appropriately adjust the sentence structure of the translation in order to achieve the more desirable translation effect. This paper tries to compare four versions of the translation of the Japanese literary work "Childhood Sweetheart", attempting to discuss the adjustment of sentence structure in translation.

**Keywords:** Translation; Sentence Structure; Word Order; Context.

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## 1. Introduction

"A sentence is the largest unit of langue and yet the smallest unit of parole. Therefore, determining the sentence as the fundamental unit of translation prompts a focus on handling the internal structure of sentences within the context.", LIN Zhang (2018) states in "On Sentences as the Basic Unit of Translation Operations". This enlightens us that when dealing with the problem of word order, we can adjust the sentence structure in terms of the sentence as a unit to acquire a more desirable translation effect.

## 2. Adjusting the Sentence Structure for Enhanced Translation

Japanese is the language of Subject-Object-Verb structure (i.e. SOV word order), while Chinese is the language of Subject-Verb-Object structure (i.e. SVO word order). The difference in the sentence structure between Chinese and Japanese often leads us to translate Japanese texts unconsciously influenced by our native Chinese language habits. This may result in a lack of awareness of the violation of this translation. If the translation is done according to the Chinese SVO structure, particularly in the translation of Japanese literary works, sometimes it will lead to some contextualization problems where the SVO structure is less appropriate. Hence, it is imperative to appropriately adjust the sentence structure of the translation, according to the context of Japanese literary works, to acquire enhanced translation. This essay compares the Chinese translations of four versions of the Japanese literary work "Childhood Sweetheart", aiming to discuss the issue of sentence structure in translation.

The Japanese literary work "Childhood sweethearts" depicted a hazy first love story in Yoshiwara. Medori, the younger sister of a courtesan, was natural beautiful, innocent and naïve, and daring personality. While Shinnyo, the son of a temple abbot, was characterized by his calm and modest nature, as well as his unwavering faith. As young teenagers experiencing the awakening of love, the boy and the girl harbored a faint admiration for each other, yet failing to alter

their doomed destinies. They encounter each other by the grace of fate, but gradually drift apart due to various societal obstacles. Eventually Medori, following her sister's example, became the new courtesan, and Shinnyo entered the temple and was dressed in the cassock. The background of the example cited in this article is that during the same school, Shinnyo was Medori's senior. At a spring sports event, everyone was having a great time, even Shinnyo who temporarily lost his usual composure and accidentally tripped, getting his clothes dirty with mud and ending up in an embarrassing state. Then, Medori noticed this and kindly took out his handkerchief to offer Shinnyo for cleaning. But unfortunately, a classmate spread rumors about Medori wanting to becoming the monk's wife, which Shinnyo cannot bear as he became the subject of idle gossip. Ever since then, Shinnyo had been agitated whenever he hear the name of Medori. Consequently he deliberately distanced himself from Medori, causing great emotional harm to her. Despite Shinnyo's indifference towards herself, Medori often gazed at Shinnyo's back for a long time.

### 2.1. Four Versions of the Translation

(1) a. Medori agreed loudly, "Got it, I'm coming!" But immediately she felt anxious, thinking that Shinnyo must have heard her. Her face could not help but burn and her heart started pounding. (Translated by XIAO Xiao, 2014)

b. "Alright, I'll be right back——," Medori replied aloud. Feeling that Shinnyo would surely have heard her voice, she couldn't help but feel shy. Then her heart throbbed and she felt a warm blush rise to her ears. (Translated by YANG Xuhui, 2019)

c. "Well, I'm coming!" Medori was loudly answering. Afraid of being heard by Shinnyo, her cheeks couldn't help but turn red, and her heart pounded. (Translated by ZHU Yuanyuan, 2014)

d. Medori responded loudly, "Okay, I'll be back immediately!" Then, worried about being heard by Shinnyo, her face suddenly turned red, and her heart began to beat rapidly. (Translated by Koiwai 2018)

## 2.2. The Necessary of Adjusting Word Order

In the preceding content of Example (1), on a rainy day, Shinnyo was assigned by her mother to deliver warm clothes to his sister. Unexpectedly, as Shinnyo passed by the house of Medori, a strong wind blew and his geta shoestring broke, and his umbrella was also blown away. The sudden breakage of the only support for the geta made it impossible to walk, which forced Shinnyo to squat on the ground. From a distance, upon seeing the person in the rain without an umbrella and with broken shoelaces, Medori felt a sense of pity. Quickly, she greeted her mother and hastily put on getas, grabbing a silk ribbon and an umbrella that had not yet been opened. As she approached, it was only then that she realized it was Shinnyo, but immediately became afraid of being seen by someone, so she cautiously hid behind the door. Shinnyo happened to turn around and saw Medori, but he didn't dare to say anything and was scared out of his wits. He wished he could immediately escape barefoot.

Unfortunately, Medori happened to witness this embarrassing scene and initially intended to give him a hand but hesitated due to their recent estrangement. It was just at that moment that her mother called out to her to come home.

Translations (1a) and (1d) both adopt the Chinese SVO word order. Since the short interval between Medori's shouting behaviour and his inner thoughts, which occurred almost simultaneously, this kind of sentence segmentation, disrupting their simultaneity, creates a sense of disjunction between the two. On the other hand, translations (1b) and (1c) place the content of the shouting before the subject and predicate. The difference is that (1c) better conveys the simultaneity of the shouting behaviour and the inner thoughts. While (1b) is a bit abrupt and unnatural in the connection between the behaviour and the thought. Although both (1a) and (1d) use such words as "immediately" and "then," there seems to be a disconnection between the preceding and following sentences. In contrast, (1c) exhibits a more natural transition between the two. Medori was shouting loudly and suddenly realized that this volume will be heard by Shinnyo, and then she blushed. The word "answering" conveys a sense of simultaneous occurrence. Therefore, (1c) is considered to be more reasonable among the four translations.

## 3. Four Versions of the Translation

(2) a. At this moment, suddenly hearing someone yelling, "Shinnyo! What's wrong? Did the toe strap of your clogs break? You look so ugly!" Shinnyo looked up in surprise and saw that it was little overlord Nagayoshi. (Translated by XIAO xiao, 2014)

b. "Shinnyo, What's the matter with you? Have you broken the geta shoestring? Look at you, how embarrassed!" Shinnyo turned around in surprise and found that it was little troublemaker Nagayoshi. (Translated by YANG Xuqian, 2019)

c. Suddenly, someone said, "Brother Shinnyo! What's up? Is the toe-loop of the clogs broken? You look so awkward!" Shinnyo was startled and turned around to see little bully Nagayoshi. (Translated by ZHU Yuanyuan, 2014)

d. Suddenly, he heard someone calling him, "Shinnyo bro! What happened? Did the geta laces break? What is this, so miserable!" Shinnyo turned back in surprise and saw that it was that little rascal Nagayoshi. (Translated by Koiwai, 2018)

## 3.1. Adjusting the Sentence Structure of Translation Better for Expressing the Context of the Original Text

In the preceding context of Example (2), Medori was still wavering between helping and not helping. She felt embarrassed to open the door to face Shinnyo, but couldn't bear to ignore him. The urging voice of her mother calling her home prompted Medori to make a decision in a short time. Medori pondered for a while and suddenly had a clever idea: neither to help nor not to help. She quietly threw the ribbon through the gap in the door. However, Shinnyo turned his head to the side, pretending not to see it. Medori was so angry when she saw Shinnyo's cold and indifferent expression that tears almost welled up in her eyes. While blaming Shinnyo for being heartless and unkind, she turned around and went to look for her mother. Shinnyo didn't dare to turn his head back until Medori left. The sight of the red silk ribbon was as beautiful as a maple leaf, which stirred something within Shinnyo and caused an inexplicable sense of melancholy to well up in his heart. Instead of picking up the ribbon and tying it to his geta as a shoelace, Shinnyo stayed there, gazed at the silk ribbon with a sense of dismay and loss, and buried himself in contemplation.

Translations (2a), (2c) and (2d) all adopt the Chinese SVO word order, in which the subject and predicate are placed before the content of speech, while translation (2b) puts the spoken content first, followed by the subject and predicate. Given that Shinnyo, absorbed in contemplation, was suddenly interrupted by the sound, translation (2b) better illustrates that the interruption brought Shinnyo's thoughts to a halt. Voice coming first is more indicative of the fact that it was the voice that brought Shinnyo back to his senses, and it was only when he turned around in surprise that he realized that the vocalist was Nagayoshi. Translation (2b) highlights the abruptness of the interruption, allowing for a more natural transition when Shinnyo turned around. Therefore, among the four translations, (2b) is considered more reasonable.

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, when translating literary works, it is not advisable to consistently adopt "Domestication" (i.e. choosing the SVO structure in Chinese) as a means of dealing with the sentence structure. We should put aside the habit of using native Chinese, take into account of the contextual background of the original text, consider whether the transition of the translation is natural and fluent, and take the sentence as the smallest unit, appropriately adjust the sentence structure to achieve the more desirable translation effect.

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