

Title	Accessibility and distance : issues of register in translations of Genji
Sub Title	
Author	De Wolf, Charles
Publisher	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要刊行委員会
Publication year	2003
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要. 英語英米文学 No.42 (2003. 3) ,p.51- 68
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10030060-20030331-0051

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Accessibility and Distance: Issues of Register in Translations of *Genji*

Charles De Wolf

The following is a longer version of a paper delivered as part of a panel presentation (*Genji Monogatari: Reception and Translation*), organised and chaired by Prof. Lawrence E. Marceau of the University of Delaware, at the Asian Studies Conference Japan 2002, held June 22-23, 2002. I am grateful to Keio University for partial funding, as the work was partially completed in Germany, 2001-2002, where I was spending sabbatical leave. Most especially I wish to thank Mrs. Masako Nakamura for helpful corrections and comments.

The story is told of English-speaking Protestants of generations past who, steadfastly refusing to accept revised translations of the Bible, defended the 1611 Authorised (King James) Version with: “They’re taking away the thou’s and the thee’s; they’re changing the way Jesus talked!”

I was oddly reminded of that apocryphal tale, when in 1988 I read a review of Martin Scorsese’s film version of Kazantzákis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The overall judgement was mixed; included, however, was a wryly critical comment concerning the language. Jesus, for example, is quoted as saying (or so I recall): “Peter, could you move over? John wants to lay down.” It seemed that whatever other blasphemies might be condoned in the name of “challenging our assumptions,” it was scandalous that the founder of Christianity should be made to speak bad English.

Of course, if there were to be a revival of more traditional “beard and

sandals” movies, complete with elegant King James English, the treatment by the media would be far more scathing. Moreover, one can imagine that, even now, some would defend Scorsese’s screenwriters as sociolinguistically more in tune with Koine Greek, to say nothing of Galilean Aramaic, than were King James’ appointed scholars. My point, however, is that even moderns seem to recognize that serious dramatic or literary representations of the remote past call for a certain linguistic gravitas. The fact that the author of one gospel writes a better or worse Greek than another is not - and surely should not be - reflected in our translations. In the end, the argument that we can only enter the world of the Bible or of *Genji* by overcoming our sense of “otherness,” i.e. by replacing our diachronic with a synchronic perspective and allowing its characters to speak in our own idiom, fails, at least in practical terms, to convince.¹

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Linguists loyal to the tradition in which I was trained are quite willing to describe and analyse language register, including literary conventions, but they will wince at anything smacking of aesthetic judgements. Pointing out that language group X regards usage Y as elegant or inelegant, standard or non-standard, is, of course, quite *comme il faut*. Resorting to one’s own prescriptivist evaluation, on the other hand, is condemned as unscientific and subjective.

Those of us who are both linguists and translators happily maintain contradictory opinions on such questions. On the one hand, I bask in the absolute Saussurian assurance that the relationship between form and meaning is *arbitraire*. On the other, I know, as does any inter-linguistic

1. This is not to deny the obvious existence of “up-to-date” Biblical translations, often guided, it would seem by the assumption that proof of one’s “relevance” — a requirement that happily does not apply to *Genji Monogatari* — is the possession of a tin ear.

adventurer, that the two are intertwined. In what follows, my purpose is less to demonstrate consistency than to steer a course between extremes.

I should first like to address the question that is begged whenever commentators on translations refer to “the flavour of the original.” What is easily forgotten when such comments are made is that taste, even in its non-metaphorical sense, is both an objectively quantifiable phenomenon and a personal and subjective sensation. In linguistic terms, it is, both phonetic and phonemic. As applied to a body of language, the notion of “flavour” necessarily implies a comparative perspective. Today’s readers of Classical Japanese, whether Japanese or non-Japanese, all have a non-native command of the language; that is, they are outsiders looking in, never quite forgetting that they are “tasting,” as it were, exotic food. Again to resort to my linguistically based analogy, we may perceive as phonemic, i.e. distinct, what to the original hearers and readers of the text was allophonic, i.e. non-distinct, and as allophonic what to them was phonemic.

In some cases, this clearly has nothing to do with either our understanding of the original or our approach to translating it. We might take, for example, a question of pure grammatical form such as the rule of *kakari-musubi*. I do not suppose that I am the only student of the language — though I admit that I may be something of an extreme case — who, on encountering in a labyrinthine Murasakian sentence the exclamatory particle *zo*, cannot resist looking to the end for the thrill and satisfaction of finding the verb in the attributive form (*rentaikēi*).

Now it is hard to imagine anyone so bound up in Sapir-Whorf relativism as to fret that the existence (or perhaps rather the subsequent loss) of this peculiar syntactic convention renders the text inaccessible and untranslatable. Indeed, it may hardly seem necessary to dwell on such obvious absurdities. Yet the fact is that when we turn to the notoriously

elusive auxiliary verb system, we encounter precisely that claim. And then there is, of course, the nasty matter of reference: Are sobriquets a necessary evil, as Edward Seidensticker claims, or are they an impudent outrage, as Royall Tyler suggests?² Is English an impossible vehicle for conveying the subtlety of Murasaki's language because it cannot get along without the vulgar, unbearable directness of pronouns?

Then there is the issue of lexicon. What relevance does the sparseness of Sino-Japanese vocabulary have to the word choices that translators make? Or is it merely enough for them to avoid glaringly obvious anachronisms and jarringly contemporary colloquialisms? René Sieffert, whose French translation of *Genji* appeared in 1988, writes:

"I wish to draw attention to a major point that I shall develop at length elsewhere, that is, the direction imposed on me by this double distance, temporal and spatial, and also by the specific nature of Heian court ladies' language. Which linguistic form was it necessary to adopt in order to most closely approximate it? Was I to resort to archaisms, thereby running the risk of sinking into the pedantic and the ridiculous? Or, on the other hand, should I write in the contemporary idiom, thereby making it all terribly up-to-date. It quickly became clear to me that a happy medium was called for, requiring me to use terms, turns of phrase, and a style which, while remaining perfectly readable to anyone reasonably imbued with literary culture, might nonetheless appear to be of a different age. I thus found myself looking for models in the 17th and 18th centuries..."

He settles on Saint-Simon (1675-1755), pointedly rejecting such later models as that of Marcel Proust, of whom he is clearly no admirer. He concludes:

"I have...attempted to avoid conspicuous anachronisms, verifying to the extent possible the date at which the words I have used first appeared in our language, in order to retain only those available to Saint-Simon. Finally, in order to bear in mind that, as was in keeping for a woman at great pains to pursue all endeavours in the best taste, it would have been almost indecent for her to use Chinese terms, I have for my part systematically refused to allow myself, except in a few particular cases, to use any word smacking of

2. See the introductions to the Seidensticker and Tyler translations.

Greek. Perhaps I have been ever so slightly excessive in my zeal, for I sense that there is decidedly less Greek in my translation than Chinese in the original!” (xxxi-xxxii)³ [tr.CD]

While happily agreeing with Sieffert’s sensible middle course, one cannot help thinking that in his obsessive attention to lexical trees he forgets the forest, i.e. the endeavour to come up with a language that “might nonetheless *appear* to be of a different age” — qui parût cependant d’un autre âge.

I have not undertaken an exhaustive search for the Greek words that Sieffert lets slip into his translation, but here I should like to refer you to a particularly striking passage in the famous discussion about women on a rainy night in *Hahakigi* (“The Broom Tree”), the novel’s second chapter, in which the Aide of Ceremonial tells of his affair with a poor scholar’s daughter, whose learning far surpasses his own. The young man is a student at the *daigaku*, which Arthur Waley translates as ‘University’, Oscar Benl as ‘Universität’. These misleading as well as distracting terms are avoided by Sieffert, Edward Seidensticker, and Royall Tyler, though it is interesting that the latter translates *daigaku* as ‘Academy’, as famously Hellenistic a word as one can imagine and yet, at least it seems to me, eminently appropriate. The young official offers an amusing account of an affair with the woman, who, however, abruptly declines to accept a visit from him, offering an explanation that comically displays her knowledge of Chinese. The difference in language, ignored by both Waley and Benl, is thrown into relief by Seidensticker and Tyler. Sieffert marks the passage less dramatically, though it may be noted that, no doubt deliberately, he allows himself to render *fubyō*? (風病), Seidensticker’s ‘coryza’, as ‘rhume’, an otherwise perfectly ordinary French word that happens to derive, as the spelling makes clear, from Greek.

3. Sieffert (1988), pp. 35-36.

Such examples illustrate what I referred to above as phonemic differences, linguistic contrasts of which the writer makes deliberate use. To borrow yet another term from linguistics, such may also be described as “marked.”

There are other examples in the tale, such as in “Tokonatsu,” the 26th chapter, variously translated as “A Bed of Carnations,” “Wild Carnations,” “The Pink,” “Tokonatsu,” and “l’Oeillet.” Tō no Chūjō’s newly discovered daughter, the Lady of Ōmi, is hopelessly rustic in both manners and speech. Eager to meet the imperial consort, her half-sister, she blurts out: さて、いつか女御殿には参りはべらむずる」 “Sate, ituka nyougo-dono ni fa mawiri-habera-zuru,” the suffix -nzu(ru) being derived from the presumptive/tentative suffix — mu plus — su ‘do’. At the time of Murasaki Shikibu, as noted in the *Makura no Soshi*, the usage had come to be frowned upon. In the Sieffert and Tyler translations, we find this sentence deliberately rendered into inelegant, though not quite substandard, language: “Alors, c’est pour quand que j’irai voir Madame l’Épouse Impériale?”; “When would it be a good time for me to get myself on over there?” As though to ensure that no reader misses the point, Tyler supplies an explanatory footnote.

Just a few lines later, the poor girl erupts in anger at her gentlewoman Gosechi’s suggestion that she might have done better with a less illustrious father: 「例の、君の、人の言ふこと破りたまひて、めざまし。今は、ひとつ口に言葉な交ぜられそ。あるやうあるべき身にこそあめれ」 “Rei no, kimi no, fito no ifu koto yaburi-tamifite, mezamasi. Ima fa fitotsu kuti ni kotoba na mazerare so. Aru yau aru beki mi ni koso amere.”⁴ (‘You constantly amaze me, spoiling whatever I say. I’ll not have you speak to me as though we were of the same standing. I’m coming into

4. All citations of *Genji Monogatari* in the original are taken from <http://extext.lib.virginia.edu/Japanese/genji/>.

my own, I am.”) Here one cannot help admiring Waley’s translation: “There you go again …, trying to put a body down whenever she opens her mouth. But you shan’t do it any more, indeed you shan’t; for they’ve made me into a lady now; and you’ll have to wait till I choose to let you speak. So there!” Eliza Doolittle could not have put it better.

Shortly thereafter she exclaims: “Otodo no kimi, tenga ni obosu tomo, kono ofon-kata-gata no sugenaku si-tamafan ni fa, tonon no uti ni fa tateri nan faya.” This too is apparently language inappropriate for a lady of high birth. Here I think it is Seidensticker’s translation that most clearly reflects the marked usage: “I’m Father’s own little pet, but that won’t do me much good if we’re not chums, me and all the rest of them.”

The end of the chapter is particularly interesting, in that it reminds us that while it is very difficult to translate good poetry, it is likewise no easy task to convey the flavour of bad poetry. The Lady of Ōmi writes to the imperial consort:

Kusa wakami
Fitati no ura no
Ikaga saki
Ikade afi min
Tago no ura-nami.

Tyler’s translation runs:

“Tender as she is,/ the plant from Hitachi Shore/ longs on Query Point/ to
see as soon as she can/ the billows on Tago Beach.”

In a footnote, he points out most of the plays-on-words and the incongruity of the place names. Needless to say, the freshness of the humour is a bit lost on 21st century English-speaking readers. Seidensticker, it seems to me, more effectively gives us a hint of just how ridiculous the verse is with:

“Cape How of the grassy pastures of Hitachi
Says how can the waves of Farmer Beach come see you.”

All of the examples I have given so far illustrate what I call the problem of “language-about-language.” In contrast with this are unmarked or, “allophonic” linguistic differences, including those pertaining to register. Relevant to this, I should like to refer to a passage in Tyler’s introduction to his own translation:

“Polite and humble language may be the first issue mentioned when someone Japanese wonders how the tale can be translated into English at all. The modern Japanese language still makes it difficult to talk to or about someone without defining one’s standing vis-à-vis that person, and other languages require similar linguistic acknowledgement; but not so contemporary English, which offers relatively few means to achieve it. Appropriate diction and choice of vocabulary can make up the difference a little, and so can added interjections like ‘my lord’ or ‘my lady’, but an English translation cannot help sounding relatively informal.” (xxvii)

“Relatively” is, of course, a relative term. Those who have read - and indeed toiled over - the original, will, of course, be acutely aware of complex and subtle differences in speech level for which in English there are no morpho-syntactic equivalents. Yet that does not in itself make the language sound “informal.” Surely it would be absurd to suggest that Heian Period aristocrats were constantly congratulating themselves on how polite and formal they were being or that English-speakers (except perhaps in cross-cultural circumstances) suffer from an “informality”complex.

This is not to say that there are not times when one wishes, for example, that English had preserved the “thou-you” distinction, traces of which we still find in Shakespeare. In Stendahl’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*, the fact that Madame de Rênal and her gruesome husband address each other with formal vous, as befits their class, and that she and her young lover Julien Sorel come to call each other by intimate *tu*, may help to highlight the fundamental conflict - a French variation on *giri* vs. *ninjō* - on which the

novel turns. In Charles Bernard-Derosne's recent French translation of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Pip's long unrequited love for Estella seems to take on added poignancy in the way they are made to address each other: she refers to him as *tu*, while even to the end he addresses her as *vous*.

It is precisely the use of the unpredictability of pronoun usage that makes for subtly different perspectives. Benl, for example, consistently uses *ihr* for both singular and plural forms of the second person, a now archaic usage; Sieffert, on the other hand, occasionally uses *tu*, as when Genji addresses his faithful retainer Koremitsu and the younger brother of the woman known as Utsusemi in the second and third chapters of the novel.

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Now I should like to turn to the following illustrative passages The first is Miyuki ("The Imperial Progress"), first in the original and then in the English, German, and French translations.

...上も見たまふ。「ささのことをそそのかししかど、中宮かくれておはす、ここながらのおぼえには、便なかるべし、かの大臣に知られても、女御かくてまたさぶらいたまへばなど、思ひ乱るめりし筋なり。若人の、さも馴れ仕うまつらむに憚る思ひなからむは、上をほの見たてまつりて、えかけ離れて思ふはあらじ」とのたまへば、「あなうたて、めでたしと見たてまつるとも、心もて宮仕思ひ立たむこそ、いとさし過ぎたる心ならめ」とて笑ひたまふ。「いで、そこにしもぞ、めできこえたまはむ」などのたまうて、また御返り...

...Ufe mo mi-tamafu. "Sa sa no koto wo sasonokasisi-kado, tiuguu kakute ofasu, koko nagara no oboye ni fa, bin-nakaru besi, ka no otodo ni sirarete mo, nyougo kakute mata saburafi-tamafe-ba nado, omofi-midaru-meri-si sudi nari. Wakaudo no, sa mo nare-tukau maturamu ni fabakaru omofi nakaramu fa, ufe wo fono-mi-tate maturi-te, e-kake-fanarete omofu fa arazi" to no tamafe-ba, "ana utate, medetasi to mitate maturu tomo, kokoro-mote

miya-dukafe-omofi-tatamu koso, ito sasi-sugitaru kokoro narama" tote warafi-tamafu. "Ide, soko ni simo zo, mede-kikoye-tamafan" nado notamoute, mata ofon-kaferi...

Genji showed the letter to Murasaki, and explained the situation. "I have been suggesting that she should apply for a post at the Palace," he said. "But I am not sure that I could get her accepted. You see, it is from my house that Lady Akikonomu entered the Imperial service, and it might be thought that I was asking too much in trying to establish a second ward of mine in a high position in the Palace. Nothing would be gained if I restored her to her father; for he too has already supplied his Majesty with a consort.* It is all very difficult and confusing...The Emperor is extremely attractive. Now that she has seen him, were she only a few years younger and somewhat less diffident about her own powers to please, she would not, I am sure, rest content till she secured a footing in his household." "How horrible you think everyone is," Murasaki answered, laughing. "Even if she admired the Emperor (and there is no reason to suppose that she did), a girl such as she would never dream of putting herself forward...We women are far less modest than you suppose." "But on the other hand the Emperor is far handsomer than you suppose, as you will admit when you see him." *Lady Chujo, To no Chujo's eldest daughter (Waley)

Genji showed the letter to Murasaki. "I have, as you see, suggested that she go to court, but already I have the empress there and should perhaps refrain from sending another lady so soon. And if I were to reveal the secret to her father he would be faced with complications because of his other daughter. A girl who can do as she pleases is of course very eager to go to court once she has had a glimpse of His Majesty."

"Don't you think," she said smilingly, "that however handsome His Majesty may be, it is good for girls to be a little less forward?"

"You may say so, but I should imagine that you yourself would be the first in line." (Seidensticker)

Genji showed her note to his darling. "I urged her to consider it, as you know, but there is Her Majesty, and as long as she stays there, that might make things difficult, and once His Excellency finds out about her, there is then the Consort. That is what seems to worry her. A girl who has glimpsed His Majesty can hardly fail to be pleased with the idea of entering into intimate service, as long as she is not too shy."

"You are awful! Even if His Majesty impressed her favorably, she could hardly put herself forward to choose palace service on her own!" She smiled. "Oh, come now, I am sure you are the one he has impressed!" (Tyler) Auch Murasaki las dieses Gedicht, und Genji sagte zu ihr:

"Ich rede ihr zu, dem Herrscher zu dienen, aber da nun schon die Kaiserin dort weilt, könnte es unangebracht erscheinen, wenn auch sie als meine Tochter kaiserliche Huld empfängt. Obgleich ich dem Naidaijin alles offen

berichten werde, ist er, da auch eine seiner Töchter dort Nyōgo ist, vielleicht wieder verstimmt und Tamakazura gerät in Bedrängnis. Unter den jungen Frauen dürfte es aber doch wohl keine geben, die nicht, falls nicht ein ernstes Hindernis besteht, gern dem Herrscher diene."

"Ach, was redet Ihr! Wie zauberhaft eine Frau, den Herrscher auch finden mag, es wäre von ihr unbescheiden, sich nach dem Hofdienst zu drängen!"

So sagte Murasaki lachend; aber Genji erwiderte scherzend:

"Oh! Ihr würdet aber als erste von ihm so begeistert sein!" (Benl)

Il le fit lire à la dame de céans.

— Voilà ce je lui avais proposé, mais en raison de la position de l'impératrice, il y aurait quelque inconvénient à la faire passer pour ma fille. Et à supposer même que le Ministre son père fut instruit de la vérité, il y aurait là de quoi renouveler ses inquiétudes passées, en ce qui concerne l'Épouse Imperiale. Une jeune personne qui ne craindrait point d'approcher familièrement Sa Majesté, dès lors qu'elle L'aurait seulement entrevue, ne résisterait certes pas à l'envie de La servir."

— Ah, fi donc! Quelle admiration qu'elle ait pour Sa Majesté, nourrir de son chef l'ambition d'entrer a Son service serait trop présomptueux!

— Bah! vous avez beau dire, vous seriez conquise vous-même! rétorqua-t-il..." (Sieffert)

There is much here that calls for comment, including what may be a mistranslation in all five European language versions, but I shall confine myself to issues of register. First, whereas both Waley and Seidensticker refer to the inner minister in terms of his paternal relationship to Tamakazura ("her father"), Tyler, Benl, and Sieffert maintain his title. In conformity to principles explained in his introduction, Tyler makes use of in-group reference with "His Excellency"; Benl resorts to "Naidaijin," the Sino-Japanese term corresponding to "Otodo"; Sieffert has "le Ministre."

Aside from the cumbersome length of the English term, there are semantic and contextual problems. Surely for those English speakers familiar with "His Excellency" as a form of reference, including those with an awareness of its archaic sense, the phrase is so bound up with the modern world of diplomacy as to demand a particularly generous suspension of disbelief in order to make it plausible. Furthermore (and

perhaps more crucially), the reader is well aware of the close relationship — in both love and war — between Genji and his one-time brother-in-law. Thus, in contrast to Otodo, which arguably functions in the original as what might be called a “titular pronoun,” Tyler’s deferential phrase is, as it were, a bit over the top.

The attentive reader will again be acutely aware that the emperor himself, though ostensibly Genji’s half-brother, is in reality his son by Fujitsubo, his late father’s now deceased consort. While we may well assume that the court ladies who first heard Murasaki Shikibu’s story would have hardly taken the use of deferential language towards him (*maturu* is an auxiliary originally denoting worship) as in any way incongruous, the use of “marked language” intended to convey the same feeling in translation runs the risk of making the implicit inappropriately explicit. Thus, Sieffert’s use of capital letters to mark the object pronouns referring to His Majesty may be admired as a clever inter-linguistic jeu-de-mots, juxtaposing syntax and orthography, but it may again make a point unintended.

The second passage to which I shall refer comes from the 29th chapter, *Miyuki*, translated by Tyler as “The Imperial Progress”):

...この御腰結には、かの大臣をなむ、御消息きこえたまうければ、大臣去年（こぞ）の冬つ方よりなやみたまふこと、さらにおこたりたまはねば、かかるにあはせて便なかるべきよしきこえたまへり。中將の君も、夜昼三条にぞさぶらひたまひて、心のひまなくものしたまうて、をりあしきを、いかにせましと思す。世もいと定めなし、宮も亡（う）せさせたまはば、御服あるべきを、知らず顔にてもにしたまはむ、罪深きこと多からむ。おはする世に、このこと表はしてむと思し取りて、三条の宮に、御訪らひがてら渡りたまふ。

...kono ofon-kosi-yufi ni fa, ka no otodo wo nan, ofon-seusoko kikoye-tamau-kere-ba, ofomiya kozo no fuyu yori nayami-tamafu koto, sara ni okotari-tamafane-ba, kakaru ni afasete bin nakaru beki yosi kikoye-tamaferi. Tiuzyau no kimo mo, yoru-firu sanzyau ni zo saburafi-tamafi-te, kokoro no fima naku monosi-tamaute, wori-asiki wo, ika ni semasi to obosu. Yo mo ito sadame nasi,, miya mo usase-tamafaba, ofon-fuku aru beki wo, sirazu kawo nite monosi-tamafan, tumi-bukaki koto ofokaran. Ofasuru yo ni, kono koto arafasiten to obosi-torite, sanzyau no miya ni, ofon-otodurafi-gatera wataritamafu.

He [Genji] accordingly wrote to To no Chujo, and without giving any explanation asked him to be sponsor the girl at the long-deferred ceremony of the Initiation, which was fixed for the second month of the new year.

The old Princess, To no Chujo's mother, had been very unwell all the winter, and though custom demanded that, if To no Chujo were sponsor, the ceremony would take place in her house, Genji feared that this would be putting her to too much inconvenience. He noticed that Yūgiri, who was constantly with her, looked more and more care-worn every day. This was a bad sign; probably the old lady would not last out many weeks more. But if she died before his intended conversation with To no Chujo had taken place, Tamakatsura would not be able to wear mourning for her, and would thus, through no fault of her own, be guilty of a serious offence. Accordingly, he set out of the Third Ward, calling first at the old Princess's apartments.

(Waley)

He [Genji] wrote asking that Tō no Chūjō do him the honor of tying the ceremonial apron. The answer came back that Princess Omiya had been ill since late the preceding year and was not improving and that it would be unseemly for To no Chujo to make ceremonial appearances. Yugiri was, moreover, living at Sanjō to be with his grandmother and would not find it convenient to divide his attentions.

And so what was to be done? Life is uncertain. Princess Omiya might die, and Tamakazura would be guilty of sacrilege if she did not go into mourning for her grandmother. The princess must be informed. Genji set out for Sanjō, ostensibly to inquire after her health. (Seidensticker)

He therefore wrote to His Excellency to invite him to tie the cord, to which His Excellency pleaded in answer that he could not very well accept because Her Highness his mother had been continually ill ever since winter set in. This was hardly the moment for the Captain either, since he was spending day and night in attendance at Sanjō, too absorbed even to think of anything else. Genji wondered what to do. Life is fleeting, he said to himself. Her Highness's passing would mean a time of mourning that she could not possibly ignore either. No, I shall speak while Her Highness is still alive. He therefore set out for Her Highness's Sanjo residence, ostensibly to inquire after her health. (Tyler)

Und so bat er in einem Brief den Naidaijin, er möge doch bei einer Zeremonie das Amt, ihr das Hüftband zu schnüren, übernehmen. Allein, jener lehnte mit der Begründung ab, das Ōmiya noch vom vorigen Jahr her unverändert krank darniederliege und er in dieser Unruhe und Sorge nicht an einem solchen Feste teilnehmen könne.

Weil Yugiri Tag und Nacht im Sanjō-Hause war, dort seine Großmutter pflegte und sich dabei so grämte, das er an nichts anderes mehr denken konnte, fand Genji diesen Zeitpunkt doch nicht günstig und wuste nicht recht, was er tun solle. Er überlegte: Wenn nun, da die Welt ja so flüchtig war, Ōmiya starb, wäre es ein Verbrechen, falls Tamakazura keine Trauergewänder trüge, wozu sie doch verpflichtet war. Da war es besser, noch zu Ōmias Lebzeiten alles offen zu bekennen. Und so begab er sich zu ihr. (Benl)

...or, quand il adressa à ce Ministre une lettre pour lui demander de «nouer la ceinture», celui-ci répondit en se récusant, car la Princesse, qui était souffrante depuis l'hiver de l'année précédente, ne s'en était point remise, circonstance inopportune en pareille occurrence. Sire le Commandant de son côté, nuit et jour s'empressait auprès de la malade de la Troisième Avenue, l'esprit toujours en alerte; ces contretemps contrariaient fort le Ministre: que faire, se demandait-il, dans cette incertitude extrême. A supposer que la Princesse mourût, la demoiselle devait porter le deuil; feindre l'ignorer serait une faute grave. Il se résolut donc à tout révéler à celle-là tant qu'elle était encore de ce monde, et il se rendit à la résidence de la Troisième Avenue, sous couleur de prendre des nouvelles de sa maladie. (Sieffert)

What is of particular interest here is that despite what would surely seem to the modern reader to be, in part, Genji's interior monologue, including the message he receives from his sometime in-law and friend, the Naidaijin, the register generally reflects the perspective of the humble narrator, whose characters are all clearly more exalted than herself. The verb phrase expressing Genji's dispatching of a letter to the Inner Minister, *kikoye-tamau-kere-ba*, indicates both the sender's deference towards the recipient and the reverence that is invariably accorded Genji. That is nothing contrary to what we might expect. Yet then comes the sentence describing the demanding activities of Genji's son, known heretofore in English as Yūgiri, now in Tyler's translation as "the Captain." On the one hand, he is subordinated to his grandmother:

suburafi- means not only “present” but, quite literally “in attendance,” as Tyler rightly renders the phrase. Yet the entire compound is suburafi-tamafu, the latter element a standard honorific.

Such suggests that this is Murasaki Shikibu speaking, not her main character. When Genji speaks directly to the Inner Minister’s daughter, known as Tamakazura, whom he has taken under his wing, he uses the same honorific, but then this same auxiliary, again in reference to her, also appears in an interior monologue: “ofon-buku aru beki wo, sirazugafo nite monosi-tamafan...”

Here one may be reminded of the story Eugene Nida tells of Balinese Christians who, in translating the New Testament into their native tongue, insisted on the use of honorifics in all references to Jesus, despite the incongruity — certainly by Balinese standards — of having the Jewish elders speak to a comparatively young rabbi in language reserved for the exalted members of society. Piety in this case seems to have easily trumped realism.⁵

This is not to deny the range and flexibility of speech levels in *Genji*. For example, no deferential language accompanies the acts and words of the unfortunate young woman known as Yūgao, the mother of Tamakazura, except when she is spoken of by her servants. Genji clearly has the same sexual interest in the daughter as he once had in the mother, but there is a contrast in the manner in which he speaks to each.

Again at the beginning of the same chapter, we glimpse a certain “downstairs” perspective, as Koremitsu, Genji’s faithful but no-nonsense retainer, says to himself on being asked by his master about a house where a potential lover may live: “Rei no urusaki mi-kokoro!” (“ah, once again my lord’s persistent predilection!”) Seidensticker and Tyler are alone in rendering this as a direct statement: “At it again!” says Seidensticker;

5. Nida (1964), p. 202-203.

Tyler has “Here he goes again!”

Even if it were possible to convey in English the differences in register with consistency and clarity, it might also be distracting. While generally supportive of Tyler’s zeal to maintain “distance” and a sense of hierarchy, I sometimes squirm at the reliance on titles rather than verbs, particularly when, as can be seen in the above excerpt, this results in repetitiveness: there are two instances of “Excellency” in a single sentence and four of “Highness” in close proximity. Similarly, Tyler’s heavy reliance on italicised pronouns to avoid specifying a person often seems to have an effect opposite to the one presumably intended. In the same example here, neither Genji (who, after all, is talking to himself) nor Murasaki Shikibu is being coy. Here, I must say, one may well prefer Sieffert’s “lademoiselle.”

The usefulness of such piecemeal, anecdotal comparisons is, of course, limited, for translations, like languages, are to a large degree self-contained systems, with elements being non-transferable, at least out of context, from one to another. My final example, this time together with Yosano Akiko’s modern Japanese rendition, is intended to illustrate how dramatically different “outputs” — none necessarily superior to another — derive from overall differences in stylistic framework. The excerpt is again from “Yūgao”; suddenly aware that his lover is likely dead, Genji is thrown into panic. :

さこそ強がりたまへど、若き御心にて、言ふかいなくなりぬるをみたまふに、やる方なくて、つと抱きて、「あが君、生き出でたまへ、いといみじき目な見せたまひそ」とのたまへど、冷え入りにたれば、けはひもの疎くなりゆく。

Sa koso tuyogari-tamafe-do, wakaki mi-kokoro nite, ifu kafi naku narinuru wo mi-tamafu ni, yaru kata nakute, tu to idakite, “A-ga kimi, iki-ide-tamafe, ito imiziki me na mise-tamafi so” to notamafe-do, fiye-iri ni-tare-ba, kefafi mono-utoku nari-yuku.

He tried to control himself, but he was very young, and seeing her lying

there all still and pale, he could contain himself no longer and crying “Come back to me, my own darling, come back to life! Do not look at me so strangely!” he flung his arms about her. But now she was quite cold. Her face was set in a dull, senseless stare. (Waley)

He had been so brave and confident, but he was young, and this was too much for him. He clung to the lifeless body. “Come back, my dear, my dear. Don’t do this awful thing to me.” But she was cold and no longer seemed human.” (Seidensticker)

...but despite his wish to be strong he was too young, and seeing her lost completely undid him. “Oh, my love,” he cried! “Don’t do this terrible thing to me!” But she was quite cold by now and unpleasant to touch. (Tyler)

...ratlos und allein, raffte er seine ganze Kraft zusammen, aber als er immer klarer die furchtbare Vergänglichkeit des Lebens hier erkannte, wußte er in seinem jungen, unerfahrenen Herzen keinen Trost. Er hielt sie fest in seinen Armen und rief:

“Hört mich! Kehrt doch zum Leben zurück! Tut mir das nicht an! “

Aber da sie schon erkaltet war, verzerrten sich nur ihre Gesichtszüge unheimlich.

Il avait montré de l’assurance jusque-là, mais il était bien jeune encore, et quand il la vit inanimée, il en fut désespéré; il la prit dans ses bras: — Madame, revenez à vous! Épargnez-moi ce terrible malheur! s’écria-t-il, mais elle était toute froide, et son aspect devenait effrayant. (Sieffert)

...右近に対して強がって何かと言った源氏であったが、若いこの人は、恋人が死んだのを見ると分別もなにもなくなって、じっと抱いていた。

...「あなた、生きてください。悲しい目を私に見せないで」と言っていたが、恋人のからだはますます冷たくて、すでに人ではなく遺骸であるという感じが強くなっていく。(Yosano Akiko)

While there is again much on which to comment, the immediately relevant phrase is *아가君* (a-ga-kimi); literally meaning ‘my lord’, as in the *Man’yōshū*, it is also used between lovers. One cannot help being immediately reminded of Romeo in Capulet’s garden: “It is my lady; o, it is my love.” Whereas the English translations of Genji’s call to Yūgao are all terms of endearment - “my own darling”; “my love”; “my dear, my dear” - the German translation simply omits the phrase. Sieffert translates

it both formally and literally: “Madame.” As with his use of “demoiselle” in the later chapter cited above, he is clearly playing on the older and narrower meaning of the term.

One is tempted to say that from the standpoint of diachronic semantics, Yosano Akiko’s use of “anata” provides a remarkable parallel. In fact, however, she has already freely used the pronoun, with both Genji and Yūgao as speakers. Needless to say, she also avails herself of the traditional sobriquets. One cannot help noting with irony — but also sympathy — that while Yosano Akiko’s priority in rendering the text into modern Japanese is accessibility, it is the latest English translator, publishing his work nearly 90 years later, who insists on maintaining a proper sense of distance.

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