

What may be gained from mistranslations of Japanese haiku?

Translations into Western languages of Japanese haiku have been done for well over a century. The shortness of these poems with their seemingly simple structure has made the form attractive to translators with little or no knowledge of the original language, and in both old and newer publications of translated haiku, mistranslations abound. In translation studies, the focus is usually on the strategies followed to reach a successful translation. In this paper, however, I will test the idea proposed by Ron Scollon that it is when we perceive that something has failed, we become aware of the tools used for intercultural communication. For this purpose I will investigate a few examples in which the cultural encounter between the translator and the text has turned into miscommunication.

Following George Steiner, I will suggest that translation is a hermeneutic process that is open ended. Mistranslation will thus not be understood as a complete failure, but rather as a first tentative step towards understanding. Analyzing the (mis)translations and the ways to get beyond their shortcomings may help us to reflect over how conventions and the cultural context function to define the borderline between understanding and misunderstanding.

It has been argued that the study of literature always is an act of intercultural communication. Not only does it demand of us that we come to terms with a multitude of unknown interconnections, cultural patterns, and histories, it forces us to change our own perspectives and preconceptions. However, it is not always possible to watch what actually happens in such an encounter of cultures. A study of translations makes sense here, as these may be regarded as a record of the efforts of the reader/translator to grasp the text and all its contextual aspects.

Herbert Jonsson

Akademin Humaniora och medier
Högskolan Dalarna