

Collocations in amateur translations

Panina Anna

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1. Introduction

Language education aims to make the student think in the target language. Yet in fact beginning students for some time continue to rely on their first language and translate from it. A lot of the didactic process, likewise, consists in translating texts and sentences. We can argue therefore that translation studies are not irrelevant to the topic of this volume. Moreover, our paper is a study of amateur efforts by persons who had no formal training in Japanese-Russian translation and whose Japanese may even be self-taught. As such we believe that these “naive translators” can be viewed as a model of the language learner, and that our findings may be of interest to educators.

For the purposes of this paper we understand collocations broadly as any combinations of words which are less than completely free. We do not include constructions, where only the grammatical forms and functional elements are set while the lexical content varies. This leaves two large categories: idioms, i.e. set expressions with non-compositional meaning, and looser combinations for which the term ‘collocation’ in the narrow sense is sometimes used (城田 1991, p. 229).

These latter are the collocations, usually word pairs, where one word carries most of the meaning while the other’s meaning is weakened and its choice restricted by convention. For example, the verbs in *deal a blow*, *make a noise* and *take a look* are almost semantically empty but not interchangeable. Verb-noun collocations of this kind are the most frequent and fall under the concept of “light verbs” (Grimshaw, Mester 1988). An insightful linguistic analysis of this phenomenon was given by I. Mel’chuk and A. Zholkovskij in their structural grammar (Мельчук 1974). Noting that there tends to be a limited number of semantic relations between the keyword and its companion, the authors represent these relations as “lexical functions”. On the same

principle as functions in mathematics, which take input and output values, lexical functions relate keywords to their companion words, mapping *blow* to *deal* and *noise* to *make*, *fog* to *thick* and *tea* to *strong*, *sheep* to *flock* and *fish* to *shoal* etc. This model was adapted and applied to the Japanese language in a study by S. Shirota (城田 1991), who uses the literary term *engo* for the companion element in the collocation. For the lack of a commonly used term, we are going to provisionally call this kind of collocations ‘clichés’.

In general collocations are not expected to be translated with collocations in the target language. They can have one-word equivalents, or no fixed equivalent at all. Conversely, it is not necessary for any collocations to be present in the source to justify their use in the translation – collocations can be adequate equivalents for single words or free word combinations.

By their very nature collocations require non-trivial processing to translate, or, in the case of idioms, even to understand them. A direct translation of an idiom would be incomprehensible, and even a cliché rendered word for word feels awkward (Галь 2007, p. 154; 城田 1991 p. 222-3). It is therefore natural to expect that an untrained translator, and by extension a beginning language student, is likely to 1) misunderstand and mistranslate idioms, and 2) translate clichés literally, creating odd phrasing in the target language.

In this paper we test this hypothesis on two amateur Japanese-Russian translations by Russian speakers with a significant difference in their Japanese skill level.

Text A is the beginning of *Kanshikan Kōgami Shin'ya*, a manga serialized online by its publisher in 2014–2015. After each monthly installment a user we shall call “E.V.” posted her raw translation of the dialogue on a forum where Russian fans discussed the franchise. Text B is the first two chapters of *Tenkū no shiro Laputa*, a novelization of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film of the same name. The Russian translation was posted by a user we shall call “K.” to a fan fiction archive (in violation of the site’s rules which prohibit translations of copyrighted material), then discontinued.

Media fandom is known for its creative activity, and if the media is foreign, fan translations appear alongside fan fiction and fan art. Ever since the late 1990-ies Japanese media has been increasingly popular with young people in Russia. It is consumed mostly in English, the language in which plenty of official and pirated material is available and which is taught in the majority of Russian schools. Nevertheless some fans develop a motivation to read or watch the original

versions and so proceed to study Japanese at university, at a variety of language classes, with a private tutor or even entirely on their own. The quality of translations produced by them for the use of other fans can range from almost professional to riddled with all kinds of beginners' mistakes. Unfortunately we have only the vaguest notion of K.'s and E.V.'s background, but are fairly certain that both are adult and neither has had academic courses in Japanese.

We are going to examine all idioms and light verb clichés in Texts A and B and in their respective Japanese sources, paying particular attention to any mistranslations or awkward phrasing.

2. Text A

The source of Text A is a manga, so all text represents spoken dialogue. By genre it is a science-fiction police thriller, and both the form and the genre contribute to the high density of collocations: there are professional terms, both real and invented for the story, many of which are light verb clichés; and idioms are used very often, giving color to the characters' speech.

Text A is generally accurate as a translation. E.V. has a good grasp of the Japanese language, and the mistakes she makes are usually related to non-trivial tasks, for example resupplying pronouns when necessary:

- (1) 社員名簿から出勤状況を送ったので

?? Я отправила данные из реестра работников <...> компании об обстоятельствах их выхода на работу.

The Russian sentence in (1) is not ungrammatical in itself, but sounds awkward in context. The speaker is addressing the person who she has sent the data to, and is stating the fact as new information. The addressee should be explicitly mentioned as a part of that information: *я отправила вам данные.*

Another example of E.V.'s persistent problems is not recognizing third person as a form of direct address:

- (2) 征陸さんに隠し事はできませんね。

**От Масаоки-сана ничего не утаить.*

The correct translation should be in second person: *От вас, Масаока-сан, ничего не утаить*, but it is not obvious, because in (2) and other conversations where the error occurs there

are three or more people talking. In order to determine whom the speaker is addressing, one needs to be aware of the difference between Japanese and Russian speech etiquette.

Compared to these finer points of grammar and usage, collocations in Text A are mostly well translated.

2.1 Idioms

(3) Idioms translated as collocations:

- 1) 当たらずとも遠からずだ *И да, и нет*;
- 2) 人を信じすぎると 痛い目 見るときあるから *Если слишком верить людям, то можно временами попадать в неприятности*;
- 3) 裏を取り 終わったところです *Я закончил сбор доказательств*;
- 4) 事を 重く 見ていない *не придает всему этому большого значения*;
- 5) 念のため на всякий случай;
- 6) 面が割れている *меня знают в лицо*;
- 7) 八つ当たり する *выместить гнев*.

(4) Idioms translated as single words or free combinations:

- 1) いい大人 が *нормальные взрослые люди*;
- 2) 買って出る *сами вызываются*;
- 3) お迎えが来た ときに > *когда придет время расставаться* (the idiom is left untranslated, but the Russian text conveys the original meaning without it);
- 4) 気をつけた ほうがいい *лучше быть осторожнее*;
- 5) 気がすま なくなってる *не могут успокоиться*;
- 6) サロンに 顔を出していた *показывался в салоне*;
- 7) 姿を消した *пропавших*;
- 8) 腹が減る *проголодается*;
- 9) 先人の言葉に 耳を傾ける *прислушаться к словам предшественников*;
- 10) 糸ひく味 じ *вкус долгоиграющий* (the idiom has no Russian equivalent and is translated with a non-standard but clever word usage);
- 11) 狡噛が妙に 気にして た *им заинтересовался Когам* (the verb's aspect is mistranslated, but the collocation itself is correct).

(5) Words or free expressions translated as idioms:

- 1) 苦労性です принимает всё слишком близко к сердцу;
- 2) こちらで引き取ります дальнейшее я возьму на себя;
- 3) 加藤なら可能なはずです ему это должно быть по силам.

In addition to the examples above, which we consider adequate, text A has several problematic translations of idioms. One is awkward, one is missing a nuance of meaning, and four more idioms are misinterpreted.

(6) 飼い主の言うことを聞かない犬

?если собака не слушает слов хозяина

“Listening” in the source idiom metonymically stands for “obeying”, therefore the translation *слушать* is too literal, even if technically correct. *Слушаться*, a cognate derived from the same root as *слушать*, would be more accurate.

(7) 白すぎて気持ち悪い

?не по себе оттого, что слишком белое

The most obvious problem with (7) is the same as in (1) above: E.V. adheres to the Japanese syntactic structure and fails to resupply a pronoun which is omitted in the source, мне *не по себе*. However the treatment of the idiom also falls short of the mark. The Russian idiom *не по себе* expresses anxiety rather than disgust; a more accurate translation would not be idiomatic – *мне противно*.

Four idioms in (8), (9), (10) and (11) were mistranslated to a bigger or lesser degree.

(8) 外堀から埋めましょう

?устраним препятствия

The source is a suggestion to approach the suspects from outside their community, and this idea is completely missing from the translation.

(9) 門前払いされる

*нас выставят за дверь

‘They will not even let us in’ is mistranslated as ‘they will turn us out’. Russian actually has an idiom that closely resembles the source: *на порог не пустят*.

(10) 往生際悪いんです

*что мертвому коню припарки

The translation uses a variant of the idiom *что мертвому припарки*, either non-conventional or due to an editing mistake, because there is no ‘horse’ in the common Russian phrasing. It also completely misses the meaning ‘too late’.

(11) 磯城の命運は尽きていた

**Жизнь Шики подошла к концу*

This is an objectively difficult idiom to translate, since Russian has no good equivalent for 命運. The closest equivalent, *удача отвернулась от ~*, feels too trivial for a conversation about life and death. One possible solution might be to use the idiom, but substitute ‘luck’ with ‘fate’: *судьба отвернулась от Сики*.

2.2 Clichés

(12) Clichés translated as collocations:

- 1) 私から情報公開の申請をしているところです *я делаю запрос на раскрытие информации*;
- 2) 研究を進めていた *проводили исследования*;
- 3) 進められていた<...>実験 *эксперимент* <...>, *проводившийся*;
- 4) 臓器移植を受けており *прошли трансплантацию органов*;
- 5) 双方にセラピーを受けてもらう *чтобы оба ... прошли терапию*;
- 6) 別の手段を取るか *или найдет другой способ*;
- 7) 内部の人間の手引きがあった *что указания давали люди изнутри*;
- 8) 危害を加えられるような状態ではない **данная ситуация не представляет опасности*. – The collocation is not translated correctly, but did not itself cause the mistake. The problem is with syntax: E.V. misunderstood 状態 as being the subject of 加える.

(13) Clichés translated as single words or free combinations:

- 1) 揺さぶりをかけましょう *попробуем встряхнуть их*
- 2) 床が凍って霜がおりてる *пол замерз и покрыт инеем*.
- 3) 適性職業につく事になるでしょう *подберут другую подходящую работу*
- 4) アレルギーを引き起こして死んだ *погиб из-за аллергии*. – This is not a failure. In contrast to its Japanese counterpart, *аллергия* in Russian can mean only the condition, not a specific episode of allergic reaction. Consequently, no equivalent collocation exists.

(14) Words or free expressions translated as light verb clichés:

- 1) 無断欠勤のヤツ *сотрудник, не выходящий на работу без уважительной причины*
- 2) 引退するよ *я на пенсию уйду*
- 3) 予測してみました *я сделала несколько предположений*
- 4) まだ治療中の身だ *вы еще проходите лечение*
- 5) 中毒性 *вызывает привыкание*
- 6) かなり上位の人物 *занимал довольно высокое положение*
- 7) 伏せておいてください *прошу удержаться от огласки*

Two more translations must be noted separately. They are factually correct but constitute stylistic errors, because their tone is much more formal than the colloquial phrasing in Japanese:

(15) 禁煙命令出しやがった

?? *отдала чертов приказ о запрете на курение*

(16) どこかで見てやがるな？

?? *Где-то ведется наблюдение?*

It is likely that E.V. does not realize the stylistic impact of やがる. Basic courses of Japanese as a foreign language do not mention this word even as something to avoid.

Example (15) is particularly interesting. Russian has no direct equivalent for やがる, the construction needs to be paraphrased, and E.V. chooses to express the speaker's negative emotions using an adjective, *чертов*. It is often seen in translations from English, because English expletives favor this syntactic position (e.g. *She's issued a freaking ban on smoking*). In Russian this construction comes off as “translationese”. A parenthetical would feel more natural: *Опять запретила курить, чтоб ее / зараза*. E.V. is not translating Text A from English, but she is probably used to the style from reading other people's translations. This choice also supports one of E.V.'s general stylistic preferences: it lets her translate 命令 as a noun, *приказ*, and use a light verb collocation. Her tendency to use nouns can be seen in the size of group (14) – the noun+verb collocations which she introduces into the text are almost as numerous as the ones originally present in the source, group (12).

Such preference for nouns is well known to professional translators into Russian. Nouns make the style formal and slow down the pacing, while verbs are more dynamic and read fluently (Галь 2007, p.30–34). A parallel can be drawn between this phenomenon and the abuse of *kango*

vocabulary in Japanese, which is pointed out in (宮脇 2009, p. 46, 48) as a common stylistic problem in translation; such words as 使用する are more “noun-like” than native *wago* verbs and similarly slow down the flow of text. In the case of Text A we can say that an excessive reliance on light verb clichés is a weakness and a symptom of the translator’s inexperience.

3. Text B

The quality of this translation is abysmally bad. In many cases the translator apparently cannot comprehend whole sentences or constructions and operates on a word-for-word level, trying to guess the larger meaning from individual words. We find such mistakes as (17) in every paragraph:

(17) 通りには果実やパン売りなども並んでいる。

<The farmer set up his stall.> *Затем разложил на нём фрукты и хлеб для продажи.*

In the translation of this sentence 通り is completely missing, and 売り is misunderstood as action (*продажа*) instead of agent. In fact the only thing these two fragments have in common are the keywords ‘bread’, ‘fruit’, ‘sell’ and ‘in a row’ (but K. is confusing 並ぶ with 並べる).

Surprisingly, there are hardly any problems with collocations in Text B.

3.1 Idioms and clichés

It must be noted that the number of idioms in the Japanese source of Text B is much fewer than in Text A; if there were more idioms, the translator would probably betray her inexperience.

(18) Idioms translated as collocations:

1) 気を失った うな в омборок;

(19) Idioms translated as single words or free combinations:

1) 金縛りを解かれた избавился от паралича;

2) 一人前の口をきいている говорил как взрослый;

3) 陰口を叩く стал критиковать;

(20) Idioms left untranslated:

1) 転げるように村に駆け戻った и ____ побежал в деревню;

2) 役に立たない火縄銃を持ち出してきた принесли ____ мушкеты.

It is unclear why K. did not translate the idioms in (20). They do not seem any more unusual or difficult than the ones in (19), 役に立たない in particular is rather basic. Seeing that many

non-idiomatic words and phrases, such as 通り in (17), are lost in Text B as well, we can probably attribute this treatment of idioms to general inaccuracy.

Even less mistakes can be found in the use of clichés. The clichés which are present in the source are interpreted correctly, and the ones introduced in Russian are also adequate.

(21) Clichés translated as collocations:

- 1) ...に起きた産業革命 произошла промышленная революция;
- 2) 適切な処置をした принявшему должные меры;
- 3) 儀式がおごそかに... 取り行われた。 обряд ... торжественно провели;
- 4) ひたすら耐えるような生活を送っていた。 они живут суровой жизнью;
- 5) 雪をかぶった<...>山々 в горах, <...> покрытых снегом.

(22) Clichés translated as single words or free combinations:

- 1) 溜め息をつきながら вздохнул
- 2) ビクッと痙攣を起こし содрогнулся;
- 3) 数頭の羊が鳴き声を上げて несколько овец заблеяло;
- 4) 報告を受けた村長 о происшествии доложили старосте (the sentence structure is changed so that 村長 is no longer the subject, but this is an adequate transformation);
- 5) 想像もつかない не мог тогда представить;
- 6) 何の疑問も持っていなかった не задумывались;
- 7) 黒メガネをかけた私服の男が四人 четверо в штатском и чёрных очках;
- 8) 二人を...見張りにつけ、двое остались на страже.

(23) Words or free expressions translated as light verb clichés:

- 1) ホットしているところに испытал облегчение;
- 2) どう処置されるおつもりか какие меры вы примените;
- 3) あたりに散った кинулись врассыпную (there is also a place where a similar expression is translated as a single verb: 三人が散り отдал трём ... подчинённым приказ рассредоточиться);
- 4) ヤクが鳴きだした послышалось мычание яков.

The percentage of this last group is remarkably low compared to Text A, and the most numerous group, twice as large as (23), is (22), noun+verb clichés translated as single predicates. Judging by these numbers, K. seems to be making a conscious effort to evade nouns in her text

and not to introduce them when there are none in the source. As a result the translation reads smoothly (deceptively so, considering how inaccurate it is).

External evidence suggests that Text B may in fact have been produced not by a single translator but by a fan translation group, where one person prepares a raw draft and one or more others, not necessarily with any knowledge of the source language, edit the draft for style. The low ratio of nouns to verbs may be an effect of the editing.

3.2 Embellishments

The most striking feature of Text B besides the number of outright mistakes is that the translation has some elements which do not correspond to anything in the source text.

Sometimes they are introduced for valid reasons. Russian does not allow ellipsis to the extent that Japanese does, necessitating additions such as the following:

- (24) 1) 輸送に不便な工場 *из-за неудобного для транспортировки товаров расположения;*
2) 発見した農夫 *обнаружившим находку крестьянам.*

In other cases, however, no grammatical reason for the changes is apparent, and it is sometimes difficult to see any motivation at all:

- (25) トウモロコシの ヒゲを持ち、差し出した
взял с прилавка кукурузу и протянул ему

We may note that *ヒゲ* is missing from the Russian version while *прилавок* is introduced, but it is very unlikely that even a complete beginner could translate ‘corn silk’ as ‘the counter’.

- (26) 万が一に備えて四六時中監視もできる
обеспечит круглосуточное наблюдение и быстрое реагирование в случае чрезвычайной ситуации

‘Swift response’ is a collocation often used in official documents and news, and its usage here may have been inspired by the formal style which this piece of dialogue is imitating (the unlikely alternative is that the cliché is a disproportionately inflated translation of 備える).

- (27) 車がどこに向かっているのかも、何のために連れていかれるのかも
что машина увозит её куда-то далеко, в неизвестность

Куда-то corresponds to どこに, but the ‘far and unknown places’ are an invention of the translator or editor.

(28) 信じられるわけがない

не могла поверить ни единому слову

This translation looks plausible in isolation, but is not optimal for its context – what the heroine really cannot believe is not the words but the whole situation of being suddenly confronted by a stranger. The translator probably picked up the keyword 信じる, imagined a likely interpretation and expressed it with a stereotypical phrasing.

Unoriginal phrasing is the common trait in (26)-(28). Several other additions in Text B are also stereotypical to the point of redundancy. In the examples below the underlined part repeats the bolded part and can be omitted without loss of meaning:

(29) 1) ムックリ起き上がってくる *тут же **вскочить** на ноги*;

2) 車が発進した *машина **тронулась** с места*;

3) 車を始動させる *заводить **мотор** автомобиля*;

4) 足を止めた *застыл, **прикованный** к месту*.

The redundant part carries little meaning of its own and is unoriginal, i.e. clichéd in the stylistic sense. The fact that its components occur together so often as to have lost originality means that the phrase can be viewed as a collocation. Together with examples (26)-(28) this group is as numerous as the well-translated collocations in (22).

Considering that the translation in Text B is mostly guesswork and that an amateur editor was likely involved, we believe that the additions and embellishments come from a desire to enliven the text – a problem not unknown even to professionals (宮脇 2009, p. 3-4).

4. Conclusion

We can see that the results are somewhat unexpected. Idioms are a known source of difficulty for the translator, and we did find some mistranslated idioms in Text A. The absence of similar mistakes in Text B is probably due to the fact that its source contains very few idioms. On the other hand, neither of the two amateur translations had any significant mistakes in the less idiomatic kind of collocations which we have provisionally termed clichés.

The cause of this phenomenon requires further research. One explanation that comes to mind is that the meaning of clichés is easier to guess from their components. Even in Text B, where hardly a single sentence is translated correctly, most of the mistakes come from the failure to

comprehend the grammar or syntactic constructions rather than individual words, and clichés resemble words in that respect. It is also likely that many of them could be found in dictionaries.

Nevertheless the treatment of collocations in Texts A and B reflects some of their respective problematic points.

The redundant collocations in Text B turn out to be the translator's additions in an attempt to mask inaccuracy by a superficially fluent style. The large number of verb+noun clichés in Text A is indicative of a broader tendency to overuse nouns. Both problems are stylistic, and thus not of the first importance to language learners, but if they are spotted and corrected early, it should greatly improve the quality of their translations in the future.

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Collocations in amateur translations

Anna Panina

The paper examines two amateur Japanese-Russian translations by Russian speakers (a manga and the first chapters of a novel) for their treatment of two kinds of collocations: combinations of nouns with light verbs and non-compositional idioms. As expected, some mistakes were found in the translations of idioms. Light verb collocations, surprisingly, were interpreted adequately even when the overall quality of the translation was bad. However, their usage shows patterns which appear to indicate large-scale stylistic problems – the overuse of nouns and the tendency to embellish the source by added material.