

# The Influence of the Presence of Others and Another Culture on One's Translation: Thinking from *Lost in Translation*

MAI NISHIHARA

Faculty of Education, Kyoto University

## Abstract

*This paper offers an interpretation of what makes a person undergo changes and how one experiences 'translation' by analyzing the movie Lost in Translation, which depicts how translation of self happens in different cultures. From the analysis of the movie, the following two things turned out to be important for one's transformation: the presence of others who accept and awaken that which is sleeping in oneself and the courage to change the crisis of encountering other cultures which one's accustomed language and order are dead into a gift.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will focus the movie *Lost in Translation* and focus on the following question: How did they lose their languages, voices and interests to the world and how did they regain them? To answer this question, this report explores the following two ideas. The first theme is the effect of interaction with other people, which helps us regain our new selves and interest in the world. The second theme is the effect of another culture, which makes us realize the importance of translation.

## THE INFLUENCE OF OTHERS ON ONE'S TRANSLATION

To examine the first point; the effect of the interaction with others on one's translation, I will focus on the scenes of interaction between Bob and Charlotte in the movie.

The first scene Bob and Charlotte meet is at the bar of the restaurant, and this is the first time when both of them find someone who they can open their hearts to and talk with. In this respect, Bob has not talked with anyone except business associates and Charlotte has struggled with communication with her husband, who seems very busy with his work and shows his annoyance with Charlotte. Instead of such states of obstruction, Bob and Charlotte talk about their concerns, for example being unable to sleep. After the first meeting, they get close to each other, and Bob goes out to have fun in Tokyo for the first time when Charlotte invites him. As suggested in the class, Bob wears very casual wear which shows that he enjoys a sense of open feeling. During a party, they run away because their friend was chased by those he provoked. In this scene, Bob and Charlotte run very fast and break into smiles, which shows us the fact that they have been frustrated with the feeling of despair in their lives and trip to Tokyo and find someone to get away from that situation and find their ways to overcome it. After they run away, they go to karaoke and as suggested in the class, the lyrics Bob sings shows his emptiness. He

sings the song with the following lyrics:

I could feel at the time  
There was no way of knowing  
Fallen leaves in the night  
...  
More than this, you know there is nothing  
More than this, tell me one thing  
More than this, there is nothing (Saito, 2019, p.92)

Besides this, it can be understood that the songs they are singing show their inner selves they do not show a lot. Charlotte sings seductively, which is a little strange compared to her normal self. Singing whatever they want at karaoke gives them a sense of freedom, it allows them to utter in their own voices which have been suppressed in their ordinary lives. That is why they draw close to each other outside of the karaoke room after the singing, they comfort each other. Another day, Bob takes her to a hospital for her “dead toes.” As presented in the class, the film has several scenes which screen toes. Features of toes are that they are the farthest parts of the body, and they are one of the most vulnerable parts of our body. Every time we hit our toes, it hurts terribly all the time. Considering these features, toes in this film represent the vulnerable part of self. Since they are the farthest part of the body, we do not pay much attention, however they are certainly parts of us, and it hurts very bad when we wound them. Charlotte’s dead toes show that some parts of her have died and need rebirth. At the same time, it can be seen that it is Bob who notices the change in Charlotte that no one cares about, and that its existence is powerful for her. This can be seen in another scene where Bob touches her toes gently while she is talking about her worries. We can see that Bob is beside her while she is struggling and trying to get out of her cocoon, and he accepts her. Another scene where toes appear is when the hotel guests evacuate due to an alarm and Bob and Charlotte see each other after the awkward lunch. She was upset with Bob’s easy relationship with another woman but turned into a smile when she saw Bob’s toes coming out of the thin slippers, he wore for emergency evacuation. Applying the above interpretation of toes, it can be seen that she feels for him and accepts him in his vulnerability to her. The day before Bob returns, Bob tells her he does not want to go home, and Charlotte jokingly tells him he can stay in Japan and play in a jazz band with her if he does not want to go home. From this conversation, it seems that both of them, especially Charlotte, know the importance of moving forward, even if it is painful. They show indecisiveness at the hotel saying goodbye, but when they bid their final farewell greeting in the streets of Tokyo with smiles and tears, this as was shown in our class represents them stepping outside of their cocoons and starting new lives: both of them show their determination to live a new life.

These are the scenes of Bob and Charlotte’s interaction. From these scenes, the following points can be considered regarding relationships with others, rediscovery of oneself, and philosophy as translation.

The first point is the significant impact of a relationship in which we can open ourselves with others on self-discovery. Here, I would like to consider the importance of relationships with others with reference to Hannah Arendt. Arendt distinguishes between “who” and “what.”

“What” is portrayed as, for example, a man, a middle-aged person, a father, a civil servant, and so on. It is said to be one’s “attribute” or “social status.” On the other hand, Arendt asserted that one’s own internal space is ambiguous, and there is no unique and prime identity there. The “who” identity is only created by the response of others to actions and words. Based on this idea, Arendt regards others as the “beginning” of self (Saito, 2000, p.39-41). It is open to argument whether the identity of “who” is formed only by the response of others, but it is certain that the inner space of oneself is obscure and that there is no unique and prime identity. This fact is depicted in this movie as discussed above. Bob and Charlotte get in a relationship where they can explore the identity of “who,” regardless of their attributes or social status. We can see that for the two, each other was the “beginning” of new selves. Moreover, Arendt said that what we must be afraid of is not the loss of identity, but the loss of others. Losing others means losing the possibility of being responded to and the loss of conversation would result in “death” as a linguistic being (Saito, 2000, p.43). Given that Bob and Charlotte had no one to talk to with respect to opening themselves to others since coming to Tokyo (or even before they came to Tokyo), it can be considered that their encounter had great significance for them to regain new interests to the world and rebirth of themselves.

The second point is the consideration of the importance of relationships with others from the perspective of Emerson’s argument. According to Saito (Saito, 2019, p.144), Emerson argued that the meaning of conversation is to accept others, get accepted by others too, and inspire and enhance each other. He said it was important to have someone who could awaken the important things that were sleeping in oneself and give one the realization that one could still accomplish something. Emerson said, “Friendship is what gives you the realization that you can still achieve something” (Saito, 2019, p.162). In the film, although their relationship is obscure and cannot be expressed as pure friendship, they accept each other and help each other’s rebirth as illustrated above.

These two points have something in common with philosophy as translation, which asserts that the identity of the self is always open to new possibilities (Saito and Standish, 2022, slide no.19). Bob and Charlotte undergo the translation that works interlingually by opening themselves to each other and entering into deep communication. They undergo transformation through the existence of each other.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF ANOTHER CULTURE ON ONE’S TRANSLATION**

However, the existence of others is not merely the cause of what makes them undergo the transformation in the film. There is another factor that has a significant impact on their rebirth, which is the existence of Japanese culture, an alien culture for Bob and Charlotte.

In the film, they struggle with differences of language and culture. For example, Bob cannot communicate with commercial directors, one is screaming. Charlotte cries and calls her mother, saying she did not feel anything about the monk’s chant at the temple. Chant can be taught as a representation of a circulation of signs that exceeds us. At the same time, there is a mindset that we are supposed to feel something when we hear something sacred, such as chant, but she could not make the chant familiar to herself. Like these scenes, other scenes also depict that both of them are in an alien culture, which is “chaos” for them. As linguistic beings, they are put in an unspeakable world and blocked by obstacles of an alien culture. They undergo the

moment of crisis, the crisis of the loss of and separation from the world, which we thought to be the basis of our culture, our language, and ourselves (Saito and Standish, 2022, slide no.79).

However, after their interaction as suggested above, their attitude to Japanese culture has changed, Charlotte, especially has changed after her trip to Kyoto. As no sound is given except music in this scene, she seems to feel close to Japanese culture and to be unified with temples, shrines, and nature in the tranquility, which was completely different to when we first encounter her. Here, she experiences something beyond the normal limits of linguistic being, beyond the nature of people, the nature of depending upon language opens her mind to the surroundings and be the one who “translates.” She has neither been to lectures nor read books about Japan, but she overcomes cultural and linguistic differences on her own and achieves her transformation. The fact that she undergoes transformation (or on her way of transformation at this scene) is depicted in the scene in which she watches the newlyweds going through temple's gate –“mon/門” in Japanese-. Although “mon” has a lot of cultural meaning, here, it can be seen as the beginning of a new journey (as the word, “kadode/門出,” which means departure and which is a combination of mon/門 and de/出 (means start, appearance and come out). She encountered a foreign culture and underwent the translation, which became a “metonym” of her life. In addition to this interpretation, her unity of surroundings in the tranquillity is resonant with Emerson's claim that when he was at peace, he did not know why, but he felt that he was surely present in his soul and felt that he was one with everything such as space, light, time, and human beings (Saito, 2019, p.68). The source of the existence of all things is the fountain that creates actions and thoughts, and this is the source of inspiration that bestows wisdom on people (Saito, 2019, p.68). Emerson argues that this divinity provides guidance that makes him true to himself. According to Emerson's idea, the trip to Kyoto and her unity of a different culture gave her the divinity which let her live her own life and transformation. She changed the crisis of loss and separation from the world into a gift, and this is what experience of translation gives us (Saito and Standish, 2022, slide no.79).

## CONCLUSION

Based on these considerations, the first question - how did they lose their languages, voices and interests to the world, and how did they regain them? – is answered from two perspectives. First, they lost their languages, voices and interests by the obstacles of complete difference and untranslatable culture. Second, they regained themselves and moreover accomplished rebirth with the existence of others who accepted them and opening up to each other, and by endeavoring to harmonize themselves with culture, to live in and accept an untranslatable world.

## REFERENCES

- Coppola, S. (dir.) (2003) *Lost in Translation* (Focus Features, American Zoetrope, Elemental Films, Inc.).
- Derrida, J. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (*Tatta Hitotsu no, Watashi no Mono Debanai Kotoba – Tasha no Tanitsugengo Shijou*) (Morinaka, Takaaki (tran.)) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001).

- Saito, J. (2000) *Public sphere* (Kokyousei) (Iwanami Shoten)
- Saito, N. (2019) *American Philosophy in Translation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International).
- Saito, N. and Kimura, H. “Changing Yourself”: A Message from Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Jibun no Kaeru' to Iukoto: A Message from Ralph Waldo Emerson*) (Tokyo: Gento-ssha, 2019).
- Saito, N. and Standish, P., Powerpoint lecture note, in International Collaborative Course (February 5-6, 2022, Online).
- Standish, P. and Saito, N. (Eds) (2017) Introduction. In *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International), pp. 1-10.