

Language Barrier: What means Derrida's message "I have only one language, yet it is not mine."

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Abstract

The movie Babel showed us a situation where language barriers lead us to loss of choice: monolingualism leads to such a situation. The reality of the present world has seen the widespread dominance of English; many people do not notice it and accept it. Taking for example the grammatical terms of English in Japanese education, the direct translation of the English grammatical word "adjective" into Japanese as "keiyoushi" can cause some confusion. English and Japanese have completely different grammatical structures, consequently, and especially in an educational context, it will be necessary to be sensitive to such differences and to take into consideration each language's cultural and historical background.

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida says in his book the *Monolingualism of the Other* (1996) "I have only one language, yet it is not mine." This sentence puzzled me a lot after the class. I am now confused between the difference of the following two sentences: I have one language, and I possess one language. I am thinking whether I can master one language and whether it is impossible to possess it.

In the following, first I shall discuss the difficulty of mutual understanding as a main thesis through my interpretation of the film *Babel* (2006). It depicts human conflict in situations where mutual understanding is not possible due to language barriers.

Each person in this film is acting to get their own happiness. An American couple, Richard and Susan are enjoying sightseeing in Morocco and trying to rebuild their relationships. In one scene we see some Moroccan children playing with a hunting gun which is used to stop jackals from trying to eat sheep, but it's like a toy for them. Then you have a Mexican woman who wants to attend her son's wedding ceremony. And finally, a young Japanese woman who wants to enjoy an age-appropriate romance. All of these are very trivial happinesses which everyone wants and takes as a matter of course. However, for the people in this film, language becomes a barrier, making it impossible to understand each other. It's not because there is not enough effort to get to know each other. Each person is struggling to live in the environment in which they were born. That's it. However, it is impossible to make mutual understanding. Indeed, it is like a tower of Babel, a situation in which ethnic groups and civilizations are divided.

Second, the situation in which we don't notice English's domination in the educational situation, I will examine next. I shall exemplify the difference between "adjective" in English and "keiyoushi" in Japanese from my experience and discuss the problems associated with

adopting a literal one-to-one corresponding translation of grammatical terminologies.

I will conclude by arguing that for me the meaning of the Derrida's sentence "I have only one language, yet it is not mine.", is that, humans never possess language because it is changing all the time and it has many meanings depending on the situation or its background, so we need to be careful as to how we use it, and never think we can use it perfectly.

SITUATIONS WHERE THERE ARE NO CHOICES

I will first discuss the film *Babel* (2006) and consider Derrida's sentence after. I will begin by focusing on the Japanese deaf young girl called Chieko. She lives in Japan which is the country considered rich and wealthy from other countries and she lives in a luxury condominium, and her father also enjoys hunting abroad. Such kind of a background makes her loneliness stand out. Usually, she enjoys communicating with her friends who go to the same deaf school by sign language, joking and laughing with each other. But when she goes out into town, the circumstance is different. She is prejudiced by men of her generation. Sometimes she is stared at, as if she was a monster. Sign language is also a language, but many people do not understand it. A lot of people don't understand what she wants. Chieko wants very little in terms of happiness. What she wants is an age-appropriate romance.

Chieko has one language which is sign language. As long as her language can't function for mutual understanding, there is no way to achieve her purpose except exposing her naked body. She just wants an age-appropriate romance like others of her generation. She bears a lot of burden because of her disability. She tells police officers that her mother jumped from a terrace of the high building and committed suicide. But It's not the truth. Her father reveals that her mother committed suicide with a gun. Gun suicide is quite rare in Japan, a country with strong gun control. It implies that she committed suicide with her father's hunting gun. Was her mother's remorse for having a child with a disability led to such an act? We can imagine that Chieko's father also bears the burden of his own life.

Chieko and her father talk together all the time. Of course, they use language to communicate each other. However, it may be just the exchange of the word to live their life. The true burden that they have may not have been able to be conveyed in the words that were uttered. She lives with all these burdens alone. It can be said that she is eager for love. The last scene in which her father gently accepts her naked body can be said to show that the reality of Chieko is accepted.

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Next, I would like to focus on Amelia, a Mexican woman, Amelia, who works as an illegal worker in the United States. Amelia also wants very little in terms of happiness: she wants to attend and celebrate her son's wedding. She is hired as a babysitter by an American couple. Although she had previously asked their employer to take a holiday to attend the wedding celebration, the American couple ask her to baby-sit their children on that day. She has no alternative but to take her employer's children to Mexico even though she is working illegal. She enjoys her son's wedding party, but a tragedy awaits when she crossed the border from Mexico to the United States.

Like Chieko, Amelia is struggling to live in a given environment. Both women do not seek

much they want very little happiness, only that which most people have. Chieko took action to expose her naked body for the purpose of having a romance appropriate for her age. In the case of Amelia, she may have had no choice but to work illegally for the purpose of living.

Considering lack of choice, American traveller Richard may be the same. Richard is Amelia's employer. He's traveling to Morocco with his wife, Susan. He is not getting along with her. In a rural Moroccan town, Susan suffered an accident. She was shot by someone. She is dying. In a rural Moroccan town, only the tour guide can speak English and knows the situation. Tour members who understand English are going to abandon Susan for fear of terrorism. Richard can't do anything because the environment is completely different from United States of America and Casablanca, the capital city of Morocco. There is no way for Richard except by praying in the uncommunicable situation.

The tour guide kept helping Richard all the time. It is really impressive that Richard tried to give him all money he had for representing his appreciation for the kindness of the guide. But the guide didn't accept it. In this scene Richard had no choice except to pay money. There are many choices to represent their own appreciation. People take different choices in a situation where they do not understand each other. Someone expresses in words, others by paying money, while others in action. Richard and his guide did take the best way or only one way to express their own feeling.

Returning to the sentence, "I have only one language, yet it is not mine," I think there are similarities between Richard's situation, where he could not speak English at all and had no choice but to pray, and Derrida's upbringing. Richard is the person who has fallen into a situation where the language he thought belonged to him was completely useless and Derrida is a person whose language which he thought was his own was given by political domination. Both situations force them to think what language is or whether the language is able to be possessed.

Jacques Derrida spoke French, and was born in Algeria. The languages spoken in Algeria are the Algerian dialect of Arabic and the Berber language. In the book the *Monolingualism of the Other* (1996) Derrida often mentioned the word "Franco-Maghrebian" and I think this is the key word to think of when interpreting the sentence "I have only one language, yet it is not mine." I guess that Derrida was always going back and forth between French and Algeria in his mind. He was born in Algeria which has its own Maghrebian culture, but speaking French. Considering the situation depicted by Babel, Derrida had no way to accept this situation except for thinking. The conclusion that he reached is that language cannot be possessed, and the phrase "I have words, but it is not mine," which may have been true for all of the language.

The film, Babel depicts a situation where there is only one choice. What gives us more choices, or what kinds of action offer us alternatives? It should be translation. In order to translate, we must know target language with the background and understand the differences between two languages. There is no one-to-one correspondence between languages, and translators must consider which words are closest to what the target sentence expresses. Because behind a language is the cultural background, translators cannot convey the meaning no matter how many words they use. The only way to overcome the difficulty of translation is to try to keep understanding both languages including their background of them.

Only by doing this, will we not fall into a monolingualism. We should know various languages without falling into English domination.

KEIYOUSHI (形容詞) IN JAPANESE AND ADJECTIVE IN ENGLISH

My first notice of the lost in translation and English domination is when I was in junior high school and attended the English grammar class.

The English teacher showed the example sentence. That is below.

-She is hungry.

The English teacher explained that the word hungry was *keiyoushi* (形容詞).

There are two reasons which made me confused; I was really confused because I translated hungry literally into Japanese as: *-onaka ga suita*. But, first of all, it is not a *keiyoushi* but a sentence, and second, I couldn't find any word that ended with *-i* from the sentence because I was taught that in Japanese the *keiyoushi* part of speech ends with *-i* (for example: *hayai* 速い *takai* 高い).

Grammatical structure between Japanese and English are completely different. In spite of this I translated directly and tried to find one to one corresponding word. English grammatical word "adjective" does not correspond to Japanese *keiyoushi* because of the different grammatical system.

For example, should we consider the difference between "quick" and "quickly" we will encounter a similar problem. In English, quick is an adjective and quickly an adverb, we can find these two words at the different place in a dictionary. On the other hand, *subayaku* (quickly) in Japanese is a conjugating form of *subayai* (quick) which is *keiyoushi*. In the other words *subayaku* (quickly) is not an adverb. It is called *renyoukei* (連用形) which means the part of the speech that adds information to a verb. Practically the function of *renyoukei* is same as adverb but the terminology is different. Compared to English, Korean grammar structure is similar to Japanese. And Korean text book for Japanese learners adopts the word of *renyoukei*.

CONCLUSION

Grammatical structures between Japanese and English are completely different. In spite of that one-to-one translation in the grammatical terminology is often used. We need to take care of such direct translations, especially in the educational context, because such kind of confusion can reduce student motivation. There are cases that teachers' fixed explanations or ideas make children confuse. We always try to avoid the situation in which meaning is lost in translation. It leads to a decrease in choice.

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Like the example I experienced and discussed in the second section, the same word can mean different things depending on the language use and vice via. Language is always changing. Human being cannot avoid their mother tongue. It is not that humans possesses language but that language possesses humans, or language haunts us all the time. That is why we cannot possess language: language is not ours. I conclude this is, the message from Derrida.

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