

Self-Back-Translation of *Lederhosen* by Haruki Murakami: A New Possibility of Literary Translation¹

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1. Introduction

Haruki Murakami is an exceptionally popular translator in Japan in addition to being one of the most famous contemporary novelists worldwide. He has translated more than 50 modern American literary works achieving as much popularity as his own novels. He is also known for having rather radical ideas regarding the links between original literary works and their translations (Murakami 1996/2008: 27-30; Murakami and Shibata 2000: 17-20; Engetsu 2010: 602-613). In some cases, his translations show differences from the generally-accepted thinking of translation; they are offered to readers not as mere textual renderings into other languages, but as intriguing attempts to form a new concept of translation. One of the attempts is what I call ‘self-back-translation’.

In this paper, I will discuss Murakami’s ‘self-back-translation’ of his short novel *Lederhosen*. The original Japanese novel, *Rēdāhōzen* (1985), was translated into English by Alfred Birnbaum as *Lederhosen* in 1992 and then included in the collection of Murakami’s short stories *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993). When the Japanese version of the collection was published, Murakami translated Birnbaum’s version back into Japanese, calling it *Rēdāhōzen* (the original title). I regard this

¹ This is based on part of a paper read at the 7th Annual Conference of St. Jerome’s Day at the University of Alberta, September 30th, 2009. I gratefully acknowledge the insightful and candid comments and advice both given at the conference and afterwards, which allowed me to revise this paper.

back-translation by the original author by himself / herself as ‘self-back-translation’.² What is interesting about Murakami’s self-back-translation is that it is not completely the same as his own original, which confronts readers with questions about how we should construe the originality / authenticity of a text and how we should think of its translation.

2. Norms of English literary translation in Japan

Before analysing Murakami’s translation, some remarks should be made concerning the norms of literary translation in Japan and how a contrast of those norms promotes a better understanding of the uniqueness of his translation.

The concept of translation norms is frequently applied in the research of Translation Studies, based on social norms developed in sociology. It is defined as ‘the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right or wrong, adequate or inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations’ (Toury 1995: 55). Although Toury divided the norms into three sub-categories according to those functions, I will refer to this concept in a broader sense as a generally accepted consensus, in a given culture in a given period, about how translation should be done.

When Japan commenced importing foreign (mainly Western) literature after the Meiji Restoration (1868), the norm was to produce free and excessively domesticated translations (almost adaptations) of the originals so that Japanese readers, completely ignorant of the foreign culture, could understand the texts easily. However, around

² Montini (2010: 306) introduces the definition of self-translation by Anton Popovič as ‘the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself’, with Nabokov and Becket mentioned as examples of self-translators. Montini continues to explain that self-translation is connected with the issue of texts in bilingual format, which raises fundamental questions as to the binary opposition of the original and the translation. However, self-‘back’-translation is more complicated in the sense that the premise concerning the original and the translation is also called into question even though they are monolingual practices.

1890 when Japan began to direct itself to understand the West more accurately rather than in a domesticated way, translation norms also began to change from loose adaptations of the originals to faithful and accurate rendering of the original (Yanagida 1961; Sato 2006; Mizuno 2007; Kondo and Wakabayashi 1998/2009³).

Insofar as English literature is concerned, the norm focusing on faithfulness and accuracy has consistently been reinforced by academia of English Literary Studies (ELS). Since ELS academia, in the late 19th century, was closely connected to the national policy of Westernization, the first and foremost objective of studying English literature at that time was to understand those texts and their broad contexts faithfully and accurately. This was naturally enrooted as a requisite attitude toward their research and it was also reflected in their translations and critiques of those works. These practices done by ELS academics became major functions for constructing and reinforcing strict translation norms pursuing faithfulness to the original.

In the late 1930s, some critics deemed unique creativity or artistic features to be crucial elements of translation, which indicated the concept that Japan was no longer subsidiary to the source culture (i.e. the West) (Sawamura 1934; Nogami 1938). However, after their defeat in World War II in 1945, the Japanese again began to strive to catch up to the culture and thoughts of the victorious Western nations in order to reconstruct itself in the eyes of the international community in the post-war era. Therefore, faithful and accurate understanding of Western texts was highly in demand and translation became a significant tool for it.

Thus, the norm, pursuing accuracy and faithfulness towards the original, has been deeply rooted into the translational culture in Japan. Under such a dominant

³ Kondo and Wakabayashi (1998/2009: 472) explained that the shift from free translation to a literal one occurred after 1885 when ‘a radical pronouncement at the time ... stated that merely conveying the plot without paying attention to the style runs counter to the art of literary translation.’ I agree with them and I would like to add that, that radical pronouncement had a political and cultural background that enabled people to deal with source texts in this way.

norm, much criticism has been directed towards the belief that translation should maintain the ‘originality / authenticity’ of the original as faithfully and accurately as possible. In other words, source-oriented translation has been highly sought after in Japan, while concepts such as ‘the translator’s creativity’ tend to be regarded as a deviation from the original / authentic work.

On the other hand, we currently see a different stance of translation from the dominant norm. For instance, in 2006, a publisher, Kobunsha, launched a series of newly re-translated classical literature whose aim was to offer readers new re-translations addressed in colloquial, lively and easy-readable languages so that the public could readily get in touch with insightful classics.⁴ Although the publisher took a great risk to deviate from the dominant norm by emphasising this reader-oriented method of translation (most likely doing so purposefully), the series has achieved commercial success in literary publication circles. In addition to Kobunsha’s ‘bucking of the system’ so to speak, Meldrum has pointed out that the reader-oriented translation strategy is becoming more common in literary publications, especially in that of popular fiction, in Japan (Meldrum 2010).

3. Murakami’s “Self-Back-Translation” of *Lederhosen*

Haruki Murakami’s short story, *Rēdāhōzen* [*Lederhosen*],⁵ originally published in Japanese in 1985, was included in a collection of his short stories, *Kaiten Mokuba no Deddo Hito* [*The Heated Race of Carousel Ponies*]. Alfred Birnbaum translated it into English in 1992 for the magazine *Granta* (Feb. 1992), with a considerable degree of editing. When a publisher, Knopf, produced the publication of Murakami’s short-story collection in English with its own text selection, *Lederhosen* was included with it. The collection, *The Elephant Vanishes* (1994), was well received

⁴ The aim of this re-translation series is written as a one-page manifestation, and inserted at the end of every book of this series.

by English speaking readers, and it was also to be published as a Japanese version.

The publication of the Japanese edition of the collection, *Zō no Shoumetsu* (2005), provided readers with an interesting look at translation. While original Japanese versions were used as texts for most pieces, Murakami did not use the original Japanese text for *Lederhosen* but, instead, made a translation of the English version into Japanese by himself. As I referred to earlier, I call this text production ‘self-back-translation.’ In addition, he made a short comment on why he decided to make that kind of translation; he stated that the English version was not so bad at all although it was edited and shortened (Murakami 2005: 24).

A Japanese scholar, Yuko Engetsu, discusses taking the self-back-translation of *Lederhosen* as an example of what Murakami thinks about translations and his originality as an author. She concludes that Murakami emphasises the ‘textual power’, no matter how the text is altered in other language(s), and this is demonstrated by his own translation practice of *Lederhosen* (2010: 612-613). Engetsu’s analysis sheds light on his unique attitude toward translation and his works. Many other critics have also described interesting cases of text rendering which simply cannot be categorised as the traditional pattern of translation of the original, casting a significant doubt on the premises about the distinction between the original

⁵ Here is the outline of *Rēdāhōzen*: ‘I talked with his wife’s friend while the wife was out. ‘She’ talked to him about her mother who divorced her father and abandoned her. The reason her mother decided to divorce was ‘lederhosen’ she tried to buy as a souvenir for her husband when she travelled alone to Germany. When she visited a shop selling lederhosen, the shop-owner refused to sell to her because a pair of lederhosen should be sold to the one buying them so that the shop owner could directly make the size or length fit to his/her actual shape. She did not want to give up buying a pair, so she went to find a man who looked exactly like her husband in shape and appearance, taking him to the shop. The shop-owner accepted her attempt and she was finally able to buy the lederhosen. However, while she looked at the man in the pair of lederhosen (who was talking cheerfully with the shop-owner as he was being fitted), she decided to divorce her husband, and never return to her home where her husband and a daughter were waiting for her. The daughter, the friend of ‘I’'s wife, could not understand why her mother abandoned her with no reasonable explanation. One day, a long time after the divorce, she and her mother met each other and her mother explained to her how she decided to divorce when buying the lederhosen. Since then, the daughter could stop hating her. When ‘I’ asked her whether she could have forgiven her mother if the lederhosen had nothing to do with that story, she answered, ‘No, I couldn’t. The point is the lederhosen.’

text and the translation (e.g. Apter 2006: 210-225; Raw 2012; Cordingley 2013). I will also discuss the controversial relationship of an author's originality and translation, by comparing versions of *Rēdāhōzen* / *Lederhosen* and by analysing Murakami's statements regarding his novels as well as translations.

3.1 A Theme of *Lederhosen*

The original collection of Murakami's short stories, *Kaiten Mokuba no Deddo Hīto*, has a theme in common with each story included in it. Murakami wrote on the theme in the opening essay attached to the collection, saying:

[...] pieces in this collection are essentially based on real stories. I was told various stories by various people, then I wrote about those stories. [...] I call those writings 'sketches'. [...] when I am writing a novel, I unconsciously pick out pieces of materials according to my own style and plot. However, my novel does not conform to my real life so completely that some pieces cannot help being left behind and getting accumulated inside of me, like a layer of sediment. It is the 'sediment' that I have written in my 'sketches.' The 'sediment' has been waiting, at the bottom of my consciousness, for being written in some forms. (9-11)

...the more stories of others we listen to and the more lives of others we see through the stories, the stronger sense of helplessness we are to feel. The 'sediment' is that helplessness. The sense of 'we can go nowhere' is the real nature of this helplessness. (15)⁶

What he called 'reality' is to be left and accumulated in one's mind like

⁶ All literal renderings from Japanese texts into English in this paper are my translations.

‘sediment’. When the ‘sediment’ is picked up, written as a story and told to us, we feel the sense of helplessness in that story. That is to say, the reality accumulated like ‘sediment’ generates the sense of helplessness – ‘we can go nowhere.’ Murakami clearly attempted to write such a reality as the one that only yields a sense of helplessness.

The original Japanese *Rēdāhōzen* included in the short-story collection was undoubtedly written under this theme. The beginning lines of it clearly address this theme.

It was summer a couple years ago when it occurred to me that I would write a series of sketches carried in this collection [*Kaiten Mokuba no Deddo Hīto*]. I had never thought of writing this type of passage before that. If she had not told me her story – if she had not asked whether a story like this could be material for a novel – I might not have written this book. In this sense, it was she who struck a match. (18)

The theme mentioned above was inspired by what ‘she had told me’, that is, *Rēdāhōzen* can be considered most clearly as a piece representing the theme of the short-stories collection. A reader who is supposed to read the opening essay beforehand would find those first lines of *Rēdāhōzen* to concord with the first essay, and would expect the hidden theme of ‘reality – sediment – helplessness’ in this literary work. This is a key for readers to understand the whole story of *Rēdāhōzen*.

As Norihiro Kato discusses, this theme of helplessness is presented as two women’s (i.e. the mother and the daughter) inner disturbances (2011: 375-391). The sense of helplessness can be interpreted as that felt by both the daughter and the mother. The real material of *lederhosen* symbolises the helplessness, causing the mother’s decision to leave her family and letting the daughter somehow accept her mother even though she still has complicated feelings. Murakami’s way of depicting

it never explains clearly the sense of helplessness felt by each woman, and it is this unclear description of the key feelings of the two women that enables readers to readily reach the diverse interpretations of the helplessness.

However, when the work was translated into English by Birnbaum, he did not attach the opening essay, neither were those first lines of *Rēdāhōzen* translated. This is a significant manipulation in the translation: no clue is presented for readers to reach the theme of the ‘reality – sediment – helplessness.’ Instead, the final lines were changed in order to give what he thought was a clue to interpret this story. The following is a comparison of the final part of the Japanese original *Rēdāhōzen* and the English *Lederhosen*. The excerpt below is the literal translation of the Japanese original.

“So you don’t hate her [her mother] anymore?” I asked her when my wife left the room.

“No, not anymore. We’re not so close at all, but I don’t think I hate her,” she said.

“Is it because she told you about the lederhosen?”

“Yes, I think so. After she explained it to me, I couldn’t go on hating her. I can’t explain why, but it may be because we are women.”

I nodded. “Well, if, if you leave the lederhosen out of it, and if it was a story just about a woman who took a trip alone to find herself independent, could you have forgiven her who had abandoned you?”

“No, I couldn’t. The point is the lederhosen.”

“I think so, too.” I said.

(Kaiten Mokuba no Deddo Hito, 36, underlined parts are my own)

While, the English version is as follows.

“So, you don’t hate your mother anymore?” I ask when my wife leaves the room.

“No, not really. We’re not close at all, but I don’t hold anything against her.”

“Because she told you about the lederhosen?”

“I think so. After she explained things to me, I couldn’t go on hating her. I can’t say why it makes any difference, I certainly don’t know how to explain it, but it may have something to do with us being women.”

“Still, if you leave the lederhosen out of it, supposing it was just the story of a woman taking a trip and finding herself, would you have been able to forgive her?”

“Of course not,” she says without hesitation. “The whole point is the lederhosen, right?”

A proxy pair of lederhosen, I’m thinking, that her father never even received.

(The Elephant Vanishes, 128-129; underlined parts are my own)

The last line is completely different from the original; Birnbaum added his own interpretation. As I mentioned above, Murakami obviously shows the theme of helplessness and his unique way of describing how ‘her mother’ and lederhosen are weirdly linked together resulting in a change of life of her daughter as well as of herself. He describes this helplessness not directly as a concrete fact but ambiguously as indiscernible feelings of either women (the mother or the daughter). On the other hand, Birnbaum altered the way of showing the helplessness by bringing ‘her father’ into the final sentence: the helplessness of ‘her mother’ is emphasised and described as a concrete matter of a real fact of the divorce.

In this case, omitting the opening lines and changing the final ones altered Murakami’s original intention inscribed in the original text(s).

3.2 Should the originality of the text be preserved or altered in translation?

Nevertheless, Murakami himself made a self-back-translation, saying that Birnbaum's translation 'is not bad at all'. His translation from the English version was a considerably literal and faithful one, which means that he accepted a translative intervention from the original.

It is worth mentioning that Murakami tends to positively endorse the alteration of the author's originality of an original work, which is also the case with his *Rēdāhōzen*. As mentioned above, Murakami made a clear statement on the theme of the text: to write about the sense of helplessness accumulated in the reality in one's mind. However, six years after the original publication, he confessed the following 'fact.'

[he asserted that all stories in the collection were based on reality] but they are – I am now confessing – all fiction. [...] what I was trying to do was to compose a bunch of lies around 'realism.' I wanted to revive the trite and old 'realism' by adding a twist to it, so that I could grasp a sort of absolute truth in it. ⁷ (Murakami 1991: ix-xii)

Generally speaking, it cannot be denied that literary studies are still likely to inquire about the original and genuine theme represented / hidden in an original text, because the literary text has long been considered to have its original and immanent artistic value written by the author. Therefore, as Robert Eaglestone points out about the traditional attitude towards the literariness of a text and the authority of an author (Eaglestone 2009: 79-82), the meaning or theme of a text has been a major part of inquiring such immanent value of literature.

Nevertheless, Murakami's confession about *Rēdāhōzen* is completely different

⁷ This comment was presented in a leaflet 'Talking about his own works', attached to *Complete Works of Haruki Murakami: 1979-1989*, volume 5.

from the belief of original and immanent artistic value one excellent author could create. If Murakami's confession shows what he really intended to do in his writing, the theme clearly stated with the first version is not a true original theme. Readers of the first version might have read the work with the author's statement as a clue to interpret it, but the statement may not be the adequate clue anymore. Furthermore, it cannot be certain if what he confessed is genuinely true or not. Here, the oft-expressed notion of the absolute originality of an original work is to be called into question.

In this sense, as far as Murakami himself does not abide by a fixation on his originality in the original form, what Birnbaum omitted and altered in the English version *Lederhosen* is not such a fundamental intervention of the text as discussed in the previous section. If Murakami does not intend to fix and protect the originality / authenticity in his works, he may well accept alterations in translation of his works. Consequently, although both the Japanese original *Rēdāhōzen* and the English *Lederhosen* are absolutely regarded as Murakami's work, they are, at the same time, considered as texts whose literariness should not be fixed as the one and only original piece of work of the author.

Turning back to the attitude toward translation, Murakami once expressed how he thought about translations of his novels:

...there is a separation between what I wrote and a translation of it. [In translation] I feel a sense of duality: the story is what I wrote, but at the same time it is not what I wrote. So, I can enjoy the discrepancy made by this duality; enjoy reading the translation of what I wrote.

(Murakami and Shibata 2000: 19)

This statement indicates that Murakami does not persist to fix and protect his originality / authenticity when it is translated into different languages. It does not

matter to him whether the translation of his work is faithfully reproduced or not. Thus, it is no wonder that Murakami dared to offer a new challenge of self-back-translation illustrating the instability of what we think as an ‘author’s originality’. He called this self-back-translation ‘fun [*asobi*]’, indicating that he knew this is not considered a mainstream of translation or other literary practices in Japan. But it can be considered that such a challenging practice of translation is for him a meaningful tool that claims the diversity of literariness of a piece of work.

A leading scholar of Japanese literature in Germany, Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, discusses, from the perspective of ‘World Literature’, the relationship between Japanese literature in the global context and the function of its translation. She suggests it is impossible to provide only one version of one text in the global environment of literature once it is translated into other languages. A literary work functions not as a fixed text in one literary context where it was first born, but as a collective entity of many versions published in other contexts (2011: 130-131)⁸.

Cécile Sakai, a French scholar as well as translator of Japanese literature, also regards Murakami’s self-back-translation of *Lederhosen* as ‘strange practice’, mentioning that this practice makes it possible to change the definition and the form of an original text. She continues, ‘[...] the pattern of thinking in literary studies has traditionally focused on the single originality [of an author]. Now a dynamics is being launched, shattering this traditional pattern.’ (2011: 112-113)

Hijiya-Kirschner’s and Sakai’s remarks suitably explain Murakami’s literary practice unfixing the oft-expressed belief of the originality of the original work.

⁸ She also mentions about Murakami’s attitude toward translations of his novels, questioning whether it is adequate to consequently promote translations worldwide only through the English version.

5. Conclusion

Murakami's self-back-translation is not just translating for 'fun'. Instead, he shows a significant literary practice that confronts the reader with the notion that there is instability in the traditional belief that an author's original piece of work has not lost any of its single originality.

Even with the current criticism and discourses regarding translation practices, the source-oriented concept of 'faithfulness to the original' or 'faithful rendering of the originality of the author' still functions as a rigid norm in literary translation in Japan (Sato 2009). It is becoming clearer than ever before that translation is not subversive to the original but embodies the diversity of the literary text. This kind of perception about translation may not be uncommon in the research of translation in the West (e.g. Bassnett and Lefevere 1998; Damrosch 2003), but in the context of Japanese translation, it is a rather challenging perspective.

However, although Murakami's challenging attitude toward literature and translation definitely deviates from the existing translation norm, it may widen the horizon of the notion of literature and introduce new translation norms, because he is a hugely popular author who can exert great influence in the literary circles of Japan. It still may be controversial on how the originality of a literary text should be considered and how translations should deal with those matters. But what Murakami attempted in his self-back-translation, as commented on by Hijiya-Kirschner and Sakai, at least lets us understand that the concept of originality / authenticity should not be fixed in only one sense, and that the practice of translation is capable of freeing the concept from the fixed state.

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