

Snow Country (2020)

雪国

The most famous translation of the classic Japanese novel *Snow Country* written by Yasunari Kawabata (川端康成), is the one made by Edward Seidensticker in 1956.

The nuances of understanding that occur between how the meaning of an idea conveyed in different languages is perceived: received, are, to me, a profound indication of the differences in culture between people from disparate parts of the world. This chasm in the transmission of information in language format is very apparent between English and Japanese. Languages that are envisaged and structured in very opposing ways. As a novice Japanese language student, I became fascinated with how one would read the first line of *Snow Country* in the original language, and how the understanding of the meaning would differ in Seidensticker's translation.

From my native English speaking person's point of view, there are 2 aspects to how this line of text, while I seesawed between Japanese and English, could be perceived: a reading of the original Japanese version, overlaid with my knowledge of Japanese language and culture to date, and a reading the English translation. I concentrated on the first line of text as a manageable sized sample of the entire novel.

国境の長いトンネルを抜けると、雪国であった

This is the original version in Japanese of the first line of *Snow Country* by Yasunari Kawabata. (Literal translation: When coming out of the long border tunnel, it was snow country)

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.

This is the first line of *Snow Country* translated by Edward Seidensticker in 1956

On my initial reading and analysis of the two texts I felt that English translation does not contain the same sense of existential transformation as is implicit in the Japanese text. In English the line is very straightforward, the train arrived in the snow country, there isn't any further overlay of meaning.

As a western person reading the Japanese text, it seems to me to suggest a larger and more emotional experience. Japanese is a very minimal language compared to English. Very often the subject of the sentence is missed out altogether, if the subject is deemed as having been made obvious by the context of the rest of the sentence. This is the case in the first line of *Snow Country*. The word "train" does not appear in the original Japanese sentence, Seidensticker added it in his translation because in English no sense can be made without a subject. The conceptual quality of the sentence in Japanese gives it a depth that implies more than the sum of its parts. As we travel through the tunnel, some sort of mysterious existential transformation is occurring.

Japanese linguistics scholars Jun'ichi Ikegami (and Kiyoshi Kawahara, in their studies of *Snow Country*, have stated that in Japanese the sentence inspires a feeling of change following a transition of time. In the Japanese original the reader identifies with someone on the train who is having this experience, undergoing this passage of transformation, both physically and psychological. We are there with him and we feel the same emotions. However in the English translation we take a more voyeuristic role. We are omnipotent observers, outside the train watching it journey through the changing landscape. In that sense the line in English describes one static scene where the only moving object is the train, which we are detached from emotionally. In Japanese we are inside the train moving with it, and we feel the energy of transfiguration as the journey continues further into the dense atmosphere of the snow.