
Introduction to the Special Issue 1

“Untranslatable” Japanese Development Concepts

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1. Why focus on the “untranslatable”?

To what extent can concepts be transferred freely between countries and groups that speak different languages? There are undoubtedly local concepts and words that are difficult to translate into English, which makes such transfer particularly challenging. In Japanese, *amae* (甘え) is one such example that resists a simple straightforward translation. If we dare to translate, it would require a long and complicated explanation that draws in much contextual information: emotional dependence or being spoiled, a uniquely Japanese need to be in good favor with, and be able to depend on, the people above and around oneself (Doi 1982). Attempting to explain *why* it is hard to translate opens up a promising avenue for understanding features of the culture in question. This special issue is a reminder that development practice takes place in particular cultural and contextual settings that requires communication between the providers and recipients of ideas.

Before delving into the question of semantics, it is valuable to differentiate this approach from the question of power. Bourdieu argued long ago that “language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 648). In the colonial context, the question of language and power has been addressed intensely. Forced assimilation through language imposition was an important instrument for the colonizers such as France and Japan to exercise their influence (Caprio 2009). Even today, some authors problematize the hegemonic status of English and French in the context of foreign aid. Vitantonio argues that languages spoken in the Global North are often used when creating manual guidelines for development and humanitarian sectors without local translations. This has the effect of excluding certain locals from accessing aid privileges, and burdening local implementors to take care of the “impossible task of translating” (Vitantonio 2022).

But suppose we try to translate non-English concepts into English, what do we lose in the process? I ask this because the theory and practice of “development” are often seen to ignore national and cultural boundaries as though ideas born in one place can be easily exported to the other. This is especially so in the context of foreign aid which is, by definition, a cross border transaction. We often talk about whether a lesson learned in one country can be applied to another. Questions are even raised between ethnic groups and cultures *within* a country. Yet their frequent designation as “pilots” betrays an underlying assumption that they can, and most likely

will, be replicated in other areas.

The development industry is awash with apparently borderless jargons: advocacy, capacity development, empowerment, impact, technical assistance, etc. These concepts are used widely across cultures. However, few have questioned how such terms play out differently in different contextual settings. Moreover, how a concept is understood has intimate relations to action and how ideas are implemented on the ground. Differences in terms are not only a matter of semantics. They have substantial practical implications.

What we need instead is an “inside out approach” that begins with the vernacular understandings of concepts, giving agency and voice to non-English speaking locals, while remaining committed to engaging with English speaking audiences (Sato and Sonoda 2021).

2. Why Japan?

Japan provides a powerful context from which to raise such questions for three reasons. 1) Japan is the first a non-English speaking country that has achieved the status of a “top donor” in the realm of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the 1980s. Although some scholarly investigations have emerged to critically examine the hegemonic role of English in the field of development studies (e.g., Erling and Seargeant 2013), studies of the international role of non-English development concepts are yet to be seen, 2) Japan is the first country that adopted the full range of Western practices, including not only technologies but also values and institutions. Its “success” in Westernization has allowed Japan to serve as an “archetype of theory,” illustrating what mainstream development “should” look like. And 3) Japan has become an advanced knowledge economy with resources to invest in knowledge creation. Japan has thus contributed greatly to development related concepts in both theory and practice, and has thus played the role as a leader in Asia.

Japan was exposed to rapid Westernization in the late 19th century with much struggle and confusion in its search for self-identity. One of the earliest commentators on Japanese development was the famous novelist Natsume Sōseki, who deplored how Japan’s civilization was being driven externally by the West. He refers poignantly to the haste of Westernization: “It is like sitting at a dinner table and having once dish after another set before us and then taken away so quickly that, far from getting a good taste of each one, we can’t even enjoy a clear look at what is being served” (Natsume 1992 [1911], p. 278).

In the process of Westernization, scholarly emphasis has always been on adoption and domestication of foreign ideas. However, “borrowing,” and its concomitant translating of ideas from English into Japanese, was only one dimension of this complex process. Howland (2001) looks beyond the realm of language toward the realm of action. The creation and circulation of new concepts offered new meanings to inform programs and policies of modernization. Yet, although Howland deals with the international migration of concepts, he discusses Japan solely as a passive recipient.

Countries in Asia have mostly been treated as reactionary “recipients” of Western ideas. This tendency obscures two critical and related questions: 1) how do local appropriations and interpretations of foreign concepts occur through their “translation,” and 2) how do such localized concepts, in turn, spread to broader international settings and shape the knowledge market.

Whilst “development” has proven one of the most central and international doctrines of civilization through the 20th century, it is rarely acknowledged that many key original ideas came to Asia from the West earlier in the 19th century. As illustrated by Shimada’s paper in this issue, *kaizen* (improvement), has developed into business operations on the ground to eliminate waste

and redundancies. It was brought from the US during the occupation period after WW2, adopted and expanded by Toyota, and is now entering Africa as an important “Japanese” concept in the global development context. To the contrary, the dramatic withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in August 2021 after more than 20 years of infusing concepts such as private property, human rights and democracy leave us pondering how far ostensibly universal concepts can penetrate into foreign lands.

3. Overview of the Special Issue

This special issue considers Japan’s role as a contributor of development ideas. By focusing on key concepts of development that emerged in Japan in the process of modernization in the 19th and early-20th century, and during its engagement as an aid donor after WW2, it explores the extent to which culturally nuanced concepts are created and contested in Japan, and translated and adapted in Asia and beyond. Again, our focus is not merely on the semantics of words but more on the different expectations and meanings attached to developmental terms which can invite international misunderstanding and conflict. Using Sōseki’s analogy, it seeks to “taste” some of the dishes that have been cooked domestically. It examines pre-existing concept or locally invented concepts, some of which have travelled beyond Japan to other neighboring countries and even to Africa.

This special issue is an in-depth investigation into the evolution of indigenous concepts, examining their emergence, translation and adaptation through time and place amidst the process of development itself. The examination of developmental concepts that have successfully took root in foreign lands offers insights into how culturally unique inventions can travel beyond national borders. What happens through the process of such translations? What is lost and what is gained when ideas are initially imported from the West, domesticated, and subsequently exported outward again?

We highlight six key concepts that are prevalent in the Japanese lexicon of development that are hard to translate. They are by no means exhaustive but they do represent key local concepts that are widely used in contemporary development discussion not only in Japan but some in China, Korea, and in Africa. They are *kaizen* (改善, improvement) by Go Shimada; *naihat-suteki-hatten* (内発的發展, endogenous development) by Kanako Omi; *yen-shakkan* (円借款, yen loans) by Hiroaki Shiga; *san-mi-it-tai* (三位一体, the trinity of trade, investment, and aid) by Muyun Wang; *hito-zukuri* (人づくり, human resources development) by Noriyuki Hashimoto, and *genba-shugi* (現場主義, hands-on approach) by Naoki Matsubara.

Development practice often produces impacts and repercussions that go beyond what one would imagine from the concepts that describe its features. It is precisely for this reason that the “mileage” of development ideas requires scrutiny. Practitioners use such ideas and concepts to justify their actions by (re-)purposing the meanings of those ideas. We believe that “untranslatable” local concepts are key to understanding how development is understood in local contexts where such concepts are translated into action. More importantly, it provides a promising avenue for democratizing the development industry itself.

On the one hand, this special issue is structured around key concepts that can be understood only in reference to the particular conversation that has unfolded or is unfolding within Japan, with Asia and with the West. However, in times when other non-Western development donors are rising, most eminently China, the discussion on the transferability of development concepts will provide readers with theoretical tools designed to pursue a global perspective on development through a local lens.

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