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Translators as mediators of citizenship: rethinking community in relational translation

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ABSTRACT

Translation is often assumed to be successful if it builds understanding beyond linguistic barriers. In contrast, failed translation signals miscommunication. The article challenges this assumption to explore the potentials of failed communication for the idea of community: how we might come together to build relationships when we fail to understand each other. The article is based on the case of multilingual migrant activism, where participants of activism rely on translators because they do not share the same language for communication. I will demonstrate that, deliberately or accidentally, voice and silence are misunderstood through the figure of the translator, and how unintelligibility comes to shape interactions. Drawing on the works of contemporary political thinkers including Jean-Luc Nancy, Iris Young, and Slavoj Žižek, I will argue that such communication failure allows us to realise community in the sharing of our own limitations of being, beyond the binary between 'us'/'host' and 'them'/'guest'.

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Introduction

Translation is intuitively a practice to promote understanding beyond linguistic barriers. In the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament, the division of language is described as an expression of God's wrath. Angered by the human aspiration to build a tower so close to the sky, God took away from humanity the 'universal' language shared among the residents of the city. Without a means to communicate, people were no longer able to work together. As the story goes, the multilingual world was thus created where humans were scattered around different corners of the earth, each speaking a different language. In the world where multiple languages are spoken, and the spread of the universal language, Esperanto, is a distant future, translation is a ready-to-use technique available to manage multilingualism. It ensures, or at least promises, that communication is possible beyond linguistic differences.

The article challenges this intuitional understanding to explore different possibilities of translation. Instead of looking at translation as a means to clear the fog of unintelligibility, it aims to develop an understanding of translation as a practice of failed communication. I turn assumptions about communication failure on their head to think about what kind of relationality might be possible when we fail to understand each other. The

need to develop such a counter-intuitive approach to translation derives from the mundane reality of translation practice I encountered when I participated in labour union activities organised by migrants in Japan.¹ The participants of activism came from different parts of the world including Brazil, China, the Philippines, and the United States. The linguistic diversity among migrant workers required translators on various occasions including collective bargaining, meetings with officials, and even meetings held within the union. Only then was I confronted by my naïve belief that people were able to understand each other, more or less, through translation. Behind the façade of clarity, communication between migrant workers and their counterparts remained patchy and partial.

The focus on translation invites us to think about citizenship not just in terms of visibility and invisibility but audibility and inaudibility. Although there has been an established body of research on migrant and refugee protests, the existing studies tend to assume the noncitizens' visibility as a sign of their audibility. This leaves some important research areas unexplored. For example, when claims to status and rights are made, who actually presents these claims? How do noncitizens maintain the ownership of their voice when there are language barriers? Or can they? What kind of contestations and solidarities does linguistic diversity produce between noncitizens and their government counterparts, as well as between noncitizens and their local supporters? And what do answers to these questions tell us about the idea of citizenship and community more broadly? This article examines these questions in the multilingual context where noncitizens, local supporters, and their counterparts do not share the same language and thus need to rely on translators who can speak on their behalf. As I will show in this article, translators who can command languages such as Chinese, English and Portuguese play a vital role in facilitating communication beyond language barriers.

Furthermore, to fully appreciate translation practices taking place in a specific linguistic context discussed in this paper – that is, verbal interactions facilitated by translators –, the article examines the implication of these practices for the idea of community.² As I will discuss in the first section, translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a relational practice. It not only facilitates communication beyond linguistic differences but also determines how we relate to one another, through which the community-making process is set in motion. These two approaches to translation – translation as a linguistic practice and as a relational one – are intertwined with each another in migrant and refugee protests. A particular kind of relationality emerges through the practice of translation where communication is conducted in different languages. In the second and third sections of the article, I will discuss different translation practices I encountered in multilingual migrant activism in Japan. These examples suggest that translation-mediated communication works in tandem with speculation, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation. Ambiguity left in communication means that people interact in a way which does not necessarily result in understanding of each other. In the final section, I will reflect on the implication of these practices for the idea of community. By drawing on the works of Bonnie Honig, Slavoj Žižek, and Iris Marion Young, I will investigate what it means to imagine community if our interaction assumes the inability to understand each other. What possibilities of 'we', as a form of community, emerge in failed communication? How might 'we' live together if communication begins with an expectation of not understanding each other?

Translation and citizenship

In response to noncitizens' protests taking place globally, there has been a steady growth of research on migrant and refugee activism for the past two decades (e.g. Moulin and Nyers 2007; Isin and Nielsen 2008; McNevin 2011; Tyler and Marciniak 2013; Johnson 2014; Bagelman 2015; Squire 2018). Refugees and migrants, who are deemed 'foreign' and 'outsiders' to the political community of the state, take matters into their own hands when their rights and status are at stake. They organise and participate in a range of protests, such as lip-sewing, street demonstrations, sit-in protests, going on strike, taking over public space, and creating sanctuaries. By organising these actions and asserting their legitimate presence in a place they live, noncitizens challenge the discourse which represents them as 'a figure of aberration, a figure of lack, lacking proper agency, proper voice, proper face' (Soguk 1999, 243).

One of the important features of citizenship struggles discussed in the literature is the spatial dimension (e.g. Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016; Turner 2016; Gonzales and Sigona 2017). To enact oneself as a political subject requires particular spatial conditions for solidarity and contestation. Space is not a mere container where human activities take place, but 'a matrix of relations' (Butler 1993, 7) through which the existing categories, such as 'citizens' and 'foreigners', are contested and new political subjects are enacted. Crucially, the spatial aspect of citizenship highlight(s) the importance of relationality in disruptive acts of citizenship. As Isin argues (e.g. 2002), a spatial arrangement is constitutive of how we interact with each other, such as differentiating ourselves from, or looking for commonalities in, others. This allows us to understand refugee and migrant activism as a site of encounters of 'different spatially positioned subjects (e.g. "natives"/"foreigners", locals/non locals)' (Maestri and Hughes 2017, 631). People with varying degrees of inclusion in the citizenship regime come together to build a solidaristic, or an antagonistic (or both, see Puumala and Maïche 2021), relationship to realise their own visions of community, of who 'we' could be.

While the existing scholarship has looked at the 'spaces of encounter and struggles' (Maestri and Hughes 2017, 629) in relation to materiality (e.g. Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008) and discursive practices (e.g. Ní Mhurchú 2014), it rarely investigates such encounters in relation to translation practice where multiple languages meet (Shindo 2019a). As Fortier's work (e.g. 2018) shows, the question of 'who speaks and in what way' is integral to the marginalising process of citizenship. And yet, it remains unclear what exactly goes on in such a critical communicative moment when noncitizens 'make an appearance – to take space, to take voice' (Nyers 2003, 1087).

The article fills this gap by looking at the figure of the interpreter who communicates the voice of noncitizens. It focuses on the case of Japan where migrant activism takes place in the multilingual context (see also Shindo 2019a). Participants of the activism speak different languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Tagalog. Because of linguistic differences and the lack of a common language, interpreters play an indispensable role in acting on behalf of noncitizens.

To investigate the link between translation and citizenship struggles, the article is built on a body of research that looks at the encounters of different languages to explore various relational possibilities. These studies ask questions such as what 'belonging to each other' means in translation and what kind of community emerges through

translation-mediated encounters. Jean-Luc Nancy's work, perhaps most explicitly, addresses the link between translation, relationality, and community (see also Shindo 2012, 2019a, 133–138). In the essay 'Our sharing of exposure' ('Watashitachi no kyoutsū no hakanasa' in Japanese) (Nancy 2001), Nancy compares the French and Japanese words for community, *communauté* in French and *kyoudoutai* in Japanese, to demonstrate how these two words are intertwined. He argues that each can never find its own equivalence in the other's language because these words reflect the different historical and political contexts of France and Japan (Nancy 2001, 223). At the same time, it is this untranslatability between the two languages that 'allows each word to make sense of its own meaning in its difference from the other' (Shindo 2019a, 135). Built on this insight, Nancy challenges the illusion that language is self-contained and argues instead that it 'does not really have an *existence* of its own' (Nancy 2001, 226, original emphasis). For Nancy, language is 'essentially in the with. Every spoken word is the simultaneity of at least two different modes of that spoken word; even when I am by myself, there is the one that is said and the one that is heard, that is, the one that is raised' (Nancy 2000, 86).

For Nancy, this 'in-the-with' nature of language lies at the centre of relationality, of how we relate to each another. Rather than looking at relationality as an encounter of two separate entities, 'the self' and 'the other', Nancy argues that relationality is realised by sharing the limit of being, or what Coward (2012, 476) calls the 'shared division'. Just as the French word for community and the Japanese one exist separately, the self and the other appear separately. And yet, the self needs the other to appear, just as the French word for community only makes sense through its difference from the same word in Japanese, and vice versa. In other words, Nancy theorises relationality as the simultaneously appearing and disappearing ontology of being. To appear as the self is, at the same time, to disappear into the other. Relationality is about sharing such ontological vulnerability, that each of us comes into being only by exposing our own inability to exist without others. In this regard, as Coward (2012, 476) put it, the line that separates the self from the other is not divisive because the boundary belongs to 'neither self nor other [...] it belongs to both and is thus shared'.

Nancy further argues that it is in this kind of relationality – the sharing of ontological vulnerability – that community emerges. Calling community 'inoperative' (Nancy 1991) rather than 'operative', Nancy challenges the widely-held image of community as an entity to belong to, a basis of the sameness, such as the 'same' cultural practice or language. Rather, for Nancy, community is akin to a 'dot' (Shindo 2012), each time presenting itself as a point of an encounter – the encounter that realises the sharing of ontological vulnerability. Community only 'happens' and 'emerges', in 'the moments, collisions and encounters which produce different subject positions' (Closs Stephens 2013, 96). In other words, belonging is not to become part of a group that seeks to be 'operative' to maintain the sameness within. Instead, Nancy's work suggests that belonging is to disappear into the other so as to appear as the self. We belong to each other, almost literally, because neither the self nor the other has the ability to come into being alone:

We do not have to identify ourselves as 'we,' as a 'we.' Rather we have to dis-identify ourselves from every sort of 'we' that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this insofar as 'we' co-appear. (Nancy 2000, 71)

Nancy's theorisation of community resonates with others who also see translation as a relational practice to envision a new idea of community. For instance, speaking in the context of Europe, Balibar (2004, 234) argues that 'the practice of translation' is critical to create a new vision of community, or what Weber (2012) calls, 'a new public sphere of translational citizenship' where people with different languages live together. Similarly, Eco (1995, 350–351) envisages the 'Polyglot Europe' as 'the solution for the [Europe's] future' where 'differences of languages are no longer barriers to communication' for people to build relationships. For both Balibar and Eco, translation is not just a communication tool to produce common meanings but a political project itself: the question of translation is that of how we should interact with others to imagine a community beyond the statist imaginary. In this regard, they chime with Zygmunt Bauman who sees 'the possibility of universalism' lying in translation because translation is a practice of 'knowing how to proceed when confronted with others who have the right to proceed in a different manner' (Bauman 1999, quoted in Balibar 2006, 6).

Others look at a specific way in which translation subverts the existing power hierarchy to build a new relationality. They see translation as both reflecting hierarchy embedded into different languages and bringing rupture into the existing power relations. Although this line of work does not explicitly discuss community in the same way as Nancy and others above, it implicitly advocates the creation of an egalitarian community to redress the present power imbalance. For example, Venuti (1995, 16) proposes the idea of '(in)visibility of translators' to resist 'the hegemonic English-language nations'. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher's idea of 'foreignization of translation', Venuti proposes the tactics of 'foreignization' which deliberately keep foreignness in translated materials rather than creating fluency and naturalness between the original and the translated. To adopt such tactics, he argues, allows us to challenge the 'unequal cultural exchanges' between the dominant English-language culture and the rest and to create a new subjectivity of foreignness.

Spivak (1993) echoes Venuti's position to highlight how translation marginalises some voices. She laments that, when non-English texts are translated into English, what is present in the original is lost in the translation process (Spivak 1993, 182). Translation can erase the voice of those who speak non-powerful languages for the sake of the powerful. To let the silenced voice be heard, Spivak urges translators to intervene in the translation process in such a way that untranslatability between languages remains intact. In a similar vein, Bhabha (1994, 227) calls for translation that keeps alive the 'foreignness of languages': 'not to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German [but] instead to turn German into Hindi, Greek, English' (Bhabha 1994, 228). Bhabha argues that translation generates a new subject position, called 'newness', which nurtures 'the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference' (Bhabha 1994, 224).

Albeit in different ways, each of these studies demonstrates that translation is a site of relationality, through which a different mode of community-making is enacted. Built on this insight, I will now turn to the practice of translation carried out in the context of multilingual migrant activism in Japan and examine what kind of relationality is produced in translation. What sort of community is imagined through relational translation? As Tymoczko (2003) points out, thinking of translation as an abstract practice filling the 'in-between' space of languages can reproduce the Western-centric and elitist idea of

translation where translators work individually as the mediators of various languages. Tymoczko (2003, 198–199; 2006) argues that this understanding of translators not only excludes other Western and non-Western experiences of translation but also creates a misleading image of translators who belong neither here nor there and are detached from reality (Tymoczko 2003, 199).

In this regard, the next two sections will help us to examine translation in the everyday grounded context of activism where day-to-day reality, such as the availability of translators and the quality of translation, determines how translation is carried out. As I will show, the translators' skills as well as their roles in the activism lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication between migrant protesters and their counterparts. This challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of understanding embedded in the existing mode of relationality and suggests a new way of relating to each other.

Accidental failure in translated communication³

In March 2008, I was asked by the Nambu Foreign Workers Caucus (FWC) to work as an interpreter for a meeting with the government agencies. This was an annual meeting organised by several labour unions and NGOs working for migrant workers to discuss with bureaucrats a range of issues concerning foreign residents, both with and without status, living in Japan. The agendas change each year, reflecting what participating organisations wish to address for that particular year. They include discriminatory employment status related to regular migrants, poor working conditions for irregular migrant workers, and detention of asylum seekers. Depending on the issues brought to the meeting, bureaucrats from relevant government agencies join the event including the National Policy Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. The annual talk with the government is an important event for civil society organisations because they get to have a face-to-face discussion with bureaucrats from relevant ministries and directly lobby them. Likewise, for bureaucrats, the event offers a unique opportunity to get information on the ground and first-hand from migrants and local activists.

The FWC largely consists of language teachers coming from English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and United States. Since Japanese was used as a working language at the meeting, the union was looking for someone who could act as an interpreter between Japanese and English. Having met me a few times previously, one member asked me to act as an interpreter. I agreed eagerly, hoping that I could be of some help for the union. I later regretted my decision. On the day of the event, I sat at the interpretation booth and waited for my turn to interpret. Soon after I started, I realised how ill-equipped I was for the task. In addition to me, there were two other interpreters, together with a member of the FWC, who translated important parts of the meeting. Nevertheless, the significant responsibility still weighed on my shoulders. Not being professionally trained as a simultaneous interpreter, I struggled to follow the discussion held in Japanese while thinking of how to translate it into English. Inevitably, some parts of the discussion escaped my attention. The talk was also peppered with labour-related legal terms of which I had limited knowledge. Consequently, I could not give detailed and precise information of what was discussed, only the general, and sometimes too literal,

translation. The result was incomplete translation. My imprecise translation clearly confused some participants, judging from how they frowned, tilted their heads, looked at me inquisitively and, to my eyes, looked puzzled.

To ask someone who is not trained as a professional simultaneous interpreter reflects a mundane reality of activism. Because of limited financial resources, the NGOs and labour unions usually look for interpreters from their own circle, such as friends, family, or even their own members. They are amateur interpreters who just happen to speak Japanese and (an)other foreign language(s) 'well enough'. The monetary compensation is minimal or non-existent. During my time at the union, some of them came regularly to serve as interpreters, while others joined occasionally. This also meant that the quality of interpretation varied each time. Sometimes the union managed to get hold of an experienced interpreter. Sometimes they might even manage to secure several interpreters who worked together to maintain a certain standard of interpretation. At other times, the quality had to be compromised because interpreters lacked sufficient skills and experience, without anyone to cover them. In other words, the translators themselves did not have full control over their surroundings, which inevitably affected their interpretation work (see also Inghilleri 2005).

For example, Bob, a native English speaker and semi-professional interpreter between English and Japanese, observed the uneven quality of translation. He originally came to Japan with a plan to become a professional interpreter. He first studied Japanese at a university and then started working as an interpreter in Japan in different places such as universities, corporations, and NGOs. Even for someone like Bob whose interpretation skills were versatile, working as an interpreter for labour unions still posed a unique challenge. Bob pointed out that interpretation in labour-related meetings required highly specialised knowledge about labour-related laws, regulations, and customs (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010). Bob was fully aware that, due to budget constraints, the union was unable to afford professional simultaneous interpreters and had to rely on 'volunteer' interpreters, some of whom were good and others not. Thinking of poor and uneven translation quality, Bob even wondered if the real purpose of translation was not so much to ensure communication between different languages, but to give an impression to migrant workers that they were 'included' in the activities conducted in Japanese (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010).

In 2010, I again attended the annual meeting with the government as a volunteer interpreter. The union also managed to find another interpreter, a union member's wife. All interpreters sat together in the corner of the room. Next to our table sat Mari, a Nikkei Peruvian who spoke Spanish and Japanese fluently. She was also a member of the Kanagawa City Union (KCU), a union primarily consisting of both regular and irregular migrant workers from South America. Mari had served as a KCU's Spanish-Japanese interpreter for this event several times. During the meeting, which lasted from the morning till the late afternoon, Mari sometimes quietly left the room. Since Mari was the only interpreter present for the Spanish-speaking participants, the interpretation was abruptly stopped when she left the room and resumed when she returned. I later asked her where she went during the meeting. As it happens, she just needed to take a break (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010).

Mari was aware that the translation she provided was inevitably incomplete because she could not be present at the meeting all the time. Since she was given little time to translate documents used at the meeting, she also bitterly acknowledged that she was

unable to provide a good quality translation (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010). She was critical that translation was not taken seriously in activism. For her, the lack of attention to translation practices signalled the lack of effort to create a movement where migrant workers could participate in a meaningful way. Mari pointed out that, unlike her, many migrant workers she worked with had no experience in joining labour union movements or political activities before coming to Japan (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010). In her mind, they lacked the knowledge to understand the political and global economic structures through which they were subjected to the status of 'migrant worker'. Therefore, she argued, it was not enough to simply translate a word from Japanese to Spanish (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010). To get to the meaning behind what was discussed in Japanese at meetings, it was necessary to have knowledge beyond language. For this reason, similarly to Bob, Mari perceived the translation provided at labour union activities to be a 'performance': translators and translated materials gave a superficial impression that communication was made possible, without any meaningful understanding of what was actually communicated (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010).

In other words, translation failure was not merely a result of budget constraints, a mundane reality that cash-strapped labour unions and NGOs had to deal with. It also reflected the power dynamics between local activists and migrant workers. If local activists seriously wanted to make sure that migrant workers joined the activism as their equal partners, the quality of translation should have been rigorously examined, and the infrastructure of translation could have been more adequate. Thus, Mari rhetorically asked: Who checked the quality of her translated materials and interpretation? Who would have interpreted on her behalf when she was the only interpreter between Spanish and Japanese and needed to take a break (Interview with Mari, 15 March 2010; also email correspondence with Mari, 10 March 2010)?

Deliberate failure in translated communication

In April 2010, I participated in a meeting held between migrants working at a language school and their employers. From the union side, the migrant members and a union organiser attended. The employers' side included several Japanese and migrants working in managerial positions, two lawyers, and a professional interpreter hired for the occasion. The main topic of the meeting was language: which language, English or Japanese, should be used at the collective bargaining. Despite English being used as the working language at collective bargaining for many years, the company recently started requesting that Japanese be used. At the meeting, the labour union members asked the reason for the company's sudden change of position. The union members considered collective bargaining held in Japanese to be time-consuming. They were afraid that such an arrangement would reduce the precious time from the union side to speak at the important occasion where employment conditions were directly negotiated with their employers. In response, the employer's side expressed their concern about the accuracy of translation. Now that the company was being sued by the union over an unfair labour practice, the management side insisted that they needed to understand, as accurately as possible, the contents of each discussion with the union side. They argued that switching to Japanese, a familiar language for them

(except 'foreign' managers) would enable them to do so. The company was reluctant to hire professional interpreters because it would cost money. The return to the previous arrangement – that is, using English as the working language – also meant that the management side had to rely on an interpreter brought in by the union side. They were suspicious of the union-hired translator and argued that there was no guarantee of whether their voice expressed in Japanese was accurately translated into English.

Whether the employer's side was truly concerned about the accuracy of translation was debatable. As the union side suspected, their employers might have simply raised the language issue to entirely avoid conducting collective bargaining in good faith. The actual intention aside, the doubt about the accuracy of translation highlights translators' ambiguous position. Since language tends to be associated with a sign of membership in a particular group, to act as a translator in a multilingual setting has been perceived dubiously. Ranging from translators used during colonial expeditions (Todorov 1984) to those working in contemporary conflicts (e.g. Apter 2006; Inghilleri 2009), translators constantly face the question of to whom they swear loyalty. Translators used by labour unions were similarly perceived as being sympathetic to migrant workers because of their official, or unofficial, affiliations with the unions.

Indeed, the interpreters I met were often aware of their own emotional attachment to the migrant workers they worked with. Albeit in different capacities, they were all activists and advocates of migrant rights: some worked at labour unions and NGOs which served migrants; some shared the same migratory experience as the people they represented; and others had personal connections to migrant workers as their friends and family members. Because of their professional, ideological, and personal positions, the interpreters often felt allegiance to migrants and felt responsible for them. Thus interpreters-cum-activists rarely saw their role as merely exchanging information between different languages. Rather, they were aware of their unique position that allowed them to mediate interactions secretly, in a way that could result in what they saw as a 'desirable' outcome for migrant workers.

However, interpreters had different views on the necessary degree of mediation. Some interpreters I talked to took the position that they should not interfere in communication to being with and tried to minimise their involvement as much as possible. Meanwhile, others believed in the need to play an active role in controlling interactions between migrants and their counterparts for the sake of the former. For example, Bob, the English–Japanese translator mentioned above, argued that interpreters needed to be faithful to what was being discussed (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010). To do so, he sometimes even imitated the personality of a speaker, so that he could communicate subtle nuances of speech in a different language. At the same time, he admitted that, as an interpreter, he had to be 'creative' (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010). He remembered one occasion where he had to act as a translator for nikkei Brazilians who spoke in English to Japanese politicians. Although the nikkei Brazilians expressed their anger bluntly, Bob felt their expression could appear 'rude' in the Japanese cultural context and decided not to convey their anger in such an explicit manner. Instead, he selected polite Japanese words to tone down their anger to convey the gist of what he thought nikkei migrant workers expressed in English (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010). In hindsight, Bob felt relieved that these

nikkei Brazilians did not speak to the politicians directly in Japanese. He was afraid that they might express themselves too provocatively, which, he thought, would be inappropriate when talking to politicians in Japan (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010).

Jose, an interpreter between Portuguese and Japanese, was also aware that he did more than simply translate one language into another. He had been working for several years at an organisation that provided educational support for children of primarily nikkei Brazilian workers in Japan. Jose, a nikkei Brazilian and native Portuguese speaker, first came to Japan as a teenager, barely able to speak Japanese. As an interpreter, Jose was aware of his own habit of adding a 'cushion' in his translation (Interview with Jose, 24 May 2010). He considered Portuguese to be a language that leaves little ambiguity. In his opinion, this contributed to the tendency of Brazilians to express their thoughts openly and forthrightly (Interview with Jose, 24 May 2010). However, he was afraid that their straightforward expression could sometimes mistakenly hurt others or give a false impression of themselves. Especially when nikkei Brazilians wanted to criticise something or communicate with municipal workers or government officials, Jose avoided direct translation (Interview with Jose, 24 May 2010). Instead, he translated in a softer tone to convey the reasons behind their criticism and avoid upsetting their Japanese counterparts. Jose argued that such indirect translation did not necessarily mean he acted unfaithfully to nikkei Brazilians. Rather, such translation was necessary to reflect different cultural practices and customs between Brazil and Japan (Interview with Jose, 24 May 2010). Knowing both cultures was a strength for him precisely because he could translate in a way which respected the differences.

Although in different ways, both Bob and Jose believed that the role of translators was first and foremost to provide a faithful translation. For them, becoming 'creative' and adding a 'cushion' in translation was a choice of professionalism: interpreters had a responsibility to ensure that communication was engaging, clear, and not misleading. For instance, Bob observed that some speakers talked in a way that failed to keep the listeners' attention for long; their talk could go on and on without any interruption. On these occasions, Bob felt the need to provide a 'creative' translation to present the speaker's point in an interesting and clear fashion (Interview with Bob, 27 April 2010). For Jose, adding a 'cushion' in translation was necessary to avoid giving the wrong impression of migrants to Japanese people. He did this based on his understanding of different cultural norms and practices between Brazil and Japan.

Unlike Bob and Jose, Takashi, an interpreter between Japanese and English, perceived translation as a way to get involved in negotiations behind the scenes. Takashi, a native Japanese speaker, attended collective bargaining between migrant workers and their employers as an interpreter. At the same time, as a devoted, long-serving union member, Takashi was also responsible for supervising the negotiation process. For this reason, Takashi tried to ensure that his translation would elicit a favourable outcome for migrant workers (Interview with Takashi, 13 May 2010). When Takashi saw necessary, he added some harsh tones in his translation to upset either the migrant workers or their employers, or both (Interview with Takashi, 13 May 2010). By doing so, he deliberately turned otherwise non-confrontational interactions into more aggressive and hostile ones. He also sometimes deliberately left ambiguity in his translation, so that the other side, which

received the translated message, felt offended because they got the impression that direct answers were purposefully avoided by their counterparts (Interview with Takashi, 13 May 2010).

Yoshiko, an interpreter between Japanese and Chinese, also felt that interfering in interactions through translation was sometimes necessary. While Takashi casually admitted his part in shaping negotiation, Yoshiko was eager to keep her involvement hidden as much as possible:

'I probably should not say it openly that I do not necessarily interpret every single word and phrase accurately. However, under certain circumstances and situations, I believe that my type of "interpretation" is necessary' (Email correspondence, with Yoshiko, 19 April 2010; author's translation; emphasis added).

For Yoshiko, those 'certain circumstances and situations' included labour disputes. Yoshiko's career as an interpreter between Japanese and Chinese spanned more than a decade. She worked at an organisation which provided advice to foreign residents in Japan on a range of issues – such as immigration status, marriage and divorce, and labour practice – in multiple languages. In addition, through her own activist network, Yoshiko also worked independently as an interpreter for migrant workers. In the latter case, Yoshiko also acted as a consultant for migrant workers. Thus, she felt that her priority was to resolve labour disputes because 'both parties are[were] already in trouble, [and] no matter how confrontational they become, nothing productive would come out of the meeting' (email correspondence with Yoshiko, 19 April 2010; author's translation). She used her role as an interpreter to minimise, if not completely remove, the tension between the two, so that the migrant workers and their employers could agree on something. When Yoshiko saw that migrant workers were getting upset during her translation, she asked them to calm down. When she saw the need to pacify either migrant workers or their employers, she would:

deliberately try to translate to include some apologetic tones or emphasise positive comments about the other side, so that the other side feels the sincerity shown by their counterparts. (email correspondence with Yoshiko, 19 April 2010; author's translation)

In other words, as she put it: 'I am mediating while translating' (email correspondence with Yoshiko, 19 April 2010; author's translation).

Thinking of community through relational translation

As I have discussed earlier, translation is a critical feature in the making of community where people meet and interact beyond linguistic differences, through which a different, more inclusive possibility of 'we' is explored – the possibility of who 'we' could be (e.g. Balibar 2004; Eco 1995). The example of multilingual migrant activism in Japan illuminates this. When noncitizens make claims to status and rights, they become visible by '*being there*, legitimately, in public space, and *being seen* to be there' (McNevin 2012, 167; original emphasis). However, their physical presence does not necessarily mean their audible presence. Mediated through the figure of the translator, noncitizens' voices are

not represented as they are, untouched and unchanged. Instead, their voices are subjected to misinterpretation, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. Thus, unintelligibility is an unavoidable feature of the community-making process.

To put it differently, if translation opens up new possibilities for relationality and community, as Nancy (1991, 2000) and others have argued, what do citizenship struggles, as mediated through translators, inform us of such possibilities? The communication failure discussed with reference to multilingual migrant activism in Japan urges us to question the meaning of ‘understanding’ in imagining community. What sort of ‘we’ can be imagined through the way ‘we’ relate to one another, if that relationality is based not on the ability to understand each other but on the inability to do so?

Here I turn to some contemporary political thinkers who discuss the unintelligibility of the ‘other’ in relation to community. Instead of looking at unintelligibility as a troublesome feature of the community-making process, these thinkers look for a creative potential in it (see also Shindo 2019b). For example, this can be seen in Bonnie Honig’s critique of ‘*modus-vivendi* liberal dreams of home’ (Honig 1994, 586; original emphasis). According to Honig, the liberal vision of home is built on the desire to manage and resolve differences, such as religious beliefs and social practices. Honig challenges this vision by looking at irreconcilable differences and conflicts as a creative source for community. Instead of treating differences and conflicts ‘in a *modus vivendi* way’, Honig sees them as an integral part of community. To do so, Honig follows Bernard Williams’ approach to dilemmas where dilemmas refer to ‘situations in which two values, obligations, or commitments conflict and there is no right thing to do’ (Honig 1994, 568). Honig’s work on dilemmas overlaps with her reading of Gothic novels. In both cases, Honig (2001) theorises community through the inability to know the other. In the case of Gothic literature, the uncertain knowledge about the other reflects the Gothic heroines’ ambiguous feeling toward their partners; with reference to dilemmas, uncertainty mirrors the tension arising from irreconcilable differences between the self and the other. Reading these two together, I see Honig’s research as presenting a powerful possibility of coming together as ‘we’ through the dilemmatic relationship where the other remains enigmatic to the self, and thus the differences between them remain unresolved.

Honig’s call for relationality built on dilemmas, or irreconcilable differences, speaks to how some geographers envision urban space: to dwell in urban space is to live with what Iris Young (1990, 238) calls ‘side-by-side particularity’. Much in the same way as Honig, Young is critical of the liberal pluralist approach to community because resolving differences and otherness is regarded as the condition of being together. Setting her thesis in an urban environment, Young (1990, 237) argues that searching for affinity is anti-urban because living in urban space involves interactions that are not turned into sameness: ‘In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness’. As Tonkiss (2003) argues, Young’s side-by-side particularity, where ‘differences remain unassimilated’ (Young 1990, 241), echoes ‘mutual strangeness’ discussed by Simmel (1997). Simmel observes that ‘metropolitans’, people living in an urban setting, have a tendency to leave differences as they are, and in this regard, they remain reserved to each other. For Simmel (1997), such reservation is not merely linked to

‘indifference, but more often than we are aware . . . a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion’. Tonkiss 2003, 300) takes Simmel’s observation of metropolitans as a creative suggestion for how we can ‘be[ing] together in a crowded city’.

Slavoj Žižek’s approach to unintelligibility echoes Honig and Young: instead of looking at not-knowing-the-other as a problem, he regards it as a productive feature of how we relate to one another (Žižek 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). In response to a series of incidents where migrant refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015 became a target of violence, Žižek argues that what underlies the hatred toward them is a desire to understand ‘others’ *despite* the (assumed) differences between ‘us’ – as ‘people of Europe’ and ‘others’ as migrant refugees. Such desire reflects a belief that there is a naked humanity that connects ‘us’ and ‘them’. Based on such belief in ‘shared humanity’, migrant refugees are made into a familiar figure to ‘us’, and their foreignness becomes decipherable (Žižek 2016a). For Žižek, such desire of ‘understanding-each-other’ precludes a way of building a relationship with ‘a dose of alienation’. Instead of assuming that we can understand each other, Žižek suggests: ‘Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that, sometimes, a dose of alienation is indispensable for the peaceful coexistence of ways of life. Sometimes *alienation* is not a problem but a solution’ (Žižek 2016a, 74, original emphasis). In other words, Žižek argues for the need to see ‘others’ as strangers, not strangers who are familiar to ‘us’ but who are alien and remain alien to ‘us’: ‘every neighbour is ultimately creepy. What makes a neighbour creepy are not his weird acts but the impenetrability of the desire that sustains these acts’ (Žižek 2016a, 73).

Importantly, unlike Honig and Young, Žižek pushes his claim further to argue that unintelligibility projected onto the other is a reflection of that onto the self. Žižek argues that the inability to know the other is not a unique feature associated with the other alone, but constitutive of the self. The sense of not knowing exactly who we are is integral to our subjectivity: not that we cannot understand others, but that we cannot even understand ourselves. This means that, having ‘a dose of alienation’ is a way not only to live with the other, but also to come to terms with our own inability to know ourselves. For Žižek (2016c), this shared sense of alienation lies at the heart of how we relate to each other: ‘not to recognise ourselves in strangers, but to recognise a stranger in ourselves’. In this respect, Žižek’s reading of relationality comes close to Nancy’s. Just as Nancy does, Žižek embraces the impossibility of coming into being without others: the self appears in the other, as a ‘stranger’ because we do not even know who we are. While Nancy discusses such impossibility as the shared ontological vulnerability, Žižek sees it as the shared sense of alienation between the self and the other.

The practice of translation I encountered in multilingual migrant activism fails to fulfil its supposed purpose of clarifying the fog of unintelligibility in communication. Mediated by translators, the voice uttered in a foreign language remains partial and muffled. Accidentally or deliberately, translation did not result in the creation of a clear image of who ‘they’ were, let alone who ‘we’ were because ‘we’ never knew how ‘our’ voice was translated to the ‘others’. Instead of clarity, translation-mediated communication shaded into ever more ambiguous voices: interactions appeared in the form of unintelligible dialogues where people did not quite understand each other.

In reading such communication failure together with Honig, Young, and Žižek, a unique possibility of relationality presents itself as an alternative way of imagining community, that is, relationality realised through uncertainty. While Fortier (2021)

offers a more problematic reading of uncertainty in relation to community, I have argued in this article that uncertainty is a productive feature of community-making. The translation-mediated interactions I encountered in multilingual migrant activism question the assumption that we can only relate to each other because there is an understanding between us. Rather, the interactions resulting in communication failure suggest that unintelligibility is as an asset, not a problem, to the way we form relationships. Starting from the assumption that understanding each other is possible but starting with uncertainty about ourselves let alone others, I have argued that citizenship struggles entail a richer implication than simply making the silenced and oppressed visible. A critical implication suggested in this article is that, in day-to-day linguistic interactions, relationality is built on the uncertainty of not quite knowing the other. Following Žižek in particular, I argue that it is perhaps here that a different relational possibility is presented to us: we come together as 'we', sharing the inability to know exactly who 'we' are, and thus seeing a 'stranger' in 'us'. This sense of uncertainty that extends beyond the boundary between the self and the other is not a problem, but a possibility itself. It allows us to come together as 'we', not despite communication failure but thanks to it.

Conclusion

In response to Europe's refugee welcome movement, Gill (2018, 80) asks: 'how can genuine, spontaneous welcome be preserved under the pressure of statist and nationalist logics and demands?' He is critical of the governmental and bureaucratic structure of welcome, which produces the hierarchical relationship between the 'host' and the 'guest' and thus undermines the genuine and grassroots response of welcome. Importantly, for Gill, the latter type of welcome involves a certain degree of vulnerability of the welcomer because 'the welcome demands intimacy' (Gill 2018, 91). In this article, I have demonstrated that intimacy is not limited to emotional closeness, as Gill seems to suggest, but a shared inability of knowing each other. Turning the assumption of communication failure on its head, I have argued that unintelligibility opens up a possibility of relationality centred on shared unintelligibility. We come together as 'we' by sharing our own inability to know each other: 'we' emerge in uncertainty. When people with different languages work together to question the relationships built on exclusionary politics, what translation does goes deeper than just making the circle of community bigger to include those previously excluded and silenced into the community (see also Shindo 2012). Translation builds a different sort of relationality, one based on uncertainty, the inability to 'get' the other and know who we are. And it is in this shared moment of exposure to such uncertainty that the division between the 'host' and the 'guest' dissolves into a more inclusive 'we'.

Notes

1. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork mainly in Tokyo from January to August 2008, and March to June 2010, involving 42 in-depth interviews and participatory observation. Between April 2010 and December 2018, I continued to participate in a migrant-led labour

union, but this article is based primarily on my observations and interviews collected in 2008 and 2010. For the analysis of other aspects of my fieldwork, see Shindo (2019a). All names of interviewees in this article are pseudonyms.

2. For this purpose, I use the words translation and interpretation interchangeably throughout the article. For those who are interested in the similarities and differences between them, see, for example, Gile (2004).
3. Elsewhere I discussed different types of mediators, including translators, who act on behalf of migrant workers in multilingual migrant activism in Japan (see Shindo 2019a).

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