

San Francisco Examiner
April 26, 1904

Interpreters and How They Cause Trouble

War Correspondent Jack London Gives Some Idea of the Japanese Translator, Of His Peculiar Mental Processes and How He Does Your Thinking For You at the Wrong Time

A Daily Report of Progress That Furnishes Food for Thought

POVAL COLLI, March 8. — In Korea every item in one's outfit is a worry all by itself. Five horses mean twenty horseshoes, and twenty horseshoes mean twenty worries about which no one will worry but onself. One mapu (groom) is harder to manage than a boy's reform school, and I verily believe it is easier to be President of the United States than to manage two mapus. And of the thousand and one worries on the Pekin Road I have given but twenty-two. I may well make it twenty-three by including the interpreter.

Mr. K. Yamada is my interpreter. He is a Japanese and he speaks as good English as the average interpreter, while his knowledge of Korea gives him an added value. Also, he knows enough French to explain to a raiding Russian officer, should the contingency arise, that I am only a harmless newspaper correspondent. I have no way of testing his French, but I hope it will not hang fire at the vital moment, as his English is wont to do.

I remember once hearing a description of a police court scene in which an Italian witness is testifying through an interpreter. A question has been asked by the court.

"Wobble, wobble, wobble, gobble," says the interpreter.

"Gobble, gobble, gobble, wobble," says the witness.

This continues back and forth for ten minutes. Then the interpreter turns to the court with the remark "The witness says 'yes.'"

I did not appreciate it at the time, but I do now. Not only is it true of our interpreters, but the very converse is true. Sitting with Mr. Yamada and interviewing a Japanese officer, I have put a simple question, requiring yes or no for an answer, and listened to "Gobble, wobble, wobble, gobble" for fifteen minutes before the answer forthcame. Also I have talked for five minutes, carefully and deliberately elaborating an important and fairly subtle statement into elementary English, and have had Mr. Yamada make a single "gobble wobble" to the officer and then say to me, "He understands."

The chief difficulty with a Korean interpreter is to get him to do any thinking, even for himself. But the chief difficulty with a Japanese interpreter is to head him off from doing your thinking as well as his own. Also the Japanese interpreter is Asiatic. He no more understands a white man's mental processes than a white man understands his. So long as his work consists in expressing one's desire for a horseshoe or a night's lodging, all well and good. But the instant the interpreter is called upon to express an abstraction, confusion and cross-purposes begin. He cannot comprehend the point of view, and at once he begins to do your thinking for you, and the worst of it is that you will not be aware of it for some time, perhaps never. The thoughts become

as elusive and scattered as the players at blindman's buff. In addition the players are rapid-change artists and are blindfolded themselves. You are "it," but you do not recognize a thought when you catch it. It was your thought the moment before, but in the intervening moment something happened to it. It has become another thought. But you do not know it, and you wander haltingly through the shifting phantasmagoria till the interview is ended and you go away with a definite conclusion in your head. You will act upon this conclusion and at the end of the week discover that it is all wrong; that all you have based upon it is wrong; that you are still "it" and must try again.

Each evening Mr. Yamada brings me a written report for the day. Such a report has just come in for to-day, and I append it with the proud assertion that I understand every word of it. Also, I challenge the reader to say the same when he has finished reading it.

"Report, Monday 8th March cloudy (about 45 degree.)

"We started Ping Yang at about 2:30 p.m. after called major general and the consul, thanking kindly advise for our party.

"P. S. we has visited major general Sasaki about our movement from Ping Yang. General says; there no danger at all for you go down Anju (Anju is city but is smaller than Ping Yang and there are staying Japanese cavalry and infants as the spy) but I want advise you that you will better to go down until my information, and so we beg to stay more Ping Yang under the general advise but we can't do that for a reason as we are correspondent and we don't like to spend so much money without pleasure and nothing news.

"We started Ping Yang disputing the advise for purpose place Anju.

"Passing Kalga village (10 Ri) from Ping Yang, Kan-fugi (5 Ri) Wolpongie (5 Ri) and arrived Poval-Colli village at about 5:30 p.m. so we walked (25 Ri) to-day.

"We saw Japanese cavalries spies at Paval villages, and they told some secret about war there is no Russian soldiers beyond Anju but sometimes will find few his spies (of cause Cosack cavalry).

"At 4 p.m. snow came down but very little and our troop were good condition.

"We expected lieut-general K. Inouye as the commander of the province division. When he reach down to Anju, certainly the fight shall begin with Russia."

If the army censor does not consider this narrative of Mr. Yamada's a betrayal of military secrets, there is a likelihood that it will go through. If he does consider it a betrayal, the censor at least will have added to his wisdom concerning the matter of interpreters.