Snow and Crow: 
*Haiku* Experience in Cultural Education

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1. Introduction

How does a poem bespeak its cultural background? How does it help students learn a foreign language if they learn, at the same time, the cognitive and aesthetic framework of the culture in which the poem is deeply rooted. And how can an experience of a piece of literary text, in reading, interpreting, and producing, contribute to the holistic process of understanding a foreign language? These are the questions that I address as I report a case study of using literary texts in a Japanese language class for the purpose of developing an effective pedagogical method for advanced learners.

The class sessions were conducted in the way that I am presenting this paper: a lecture, an exercise, and a review analysis. More precisely, the first session was a lecture on the comparison of a poem in the target language (i.e., a Japanese *haiku* by Basho Matsuo) with a similar poem in the native language of the students (i.e., an English short poem by Robert Frost), followed by questions and answers; the second session was an oral recitation of the poem learned; the third session was an exercise in which the class was asked to compose a *haiku* version of the English poem (either in English or in Japanese according to the level of the students); and the final session was a review of the main points of the lecture by using the *haiku* compositions handed in by the students.
2. Comparison of Basho and Frost: A Lecture

The two poems that I have chosen are as follows:

**Haiku** by Basho (1972 [1693]: 212)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>transcription</th>
<th>word-by-word English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>higoro nikuki</td>
<td>usually hateful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karasu mo yuki no</td>
<td>crow too snow of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ashita kana</td>
<td>mom ....</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

'Even for a usually hateful crow, there is a morning of snow.'
(My translation)

"The Dust of Snow" by Robert Frost (1972 [1923]: 89)

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

The choice of these two poems for the purpose of comparison is based on the following common denominators: (1) thematic similarity and (2) brevity in form. In other words, these two poems describe a similar theme, i.e., snow and crow in a somewhat similar form, i.e., shortness. For any comparison, common denominators are important. The particular reason I have chosen these two denominators is that I wanted to highlight the differences in the cognitive and semiotic frameworks in the representation/interpretation of a similar theme, in terms of position of narrator, logic and movement of description, mode of representation and interpretive process left to the reader.

Before comparing the two poems, I would like to explain briefly about haiku. *Haiku* is the shortest form of Japanese traditional poetry, consisting of seventeen morae, divided into three sections of 5-7-5. Taking its form from the first three lines of the 31 morae *tanka*, *haiku* began to
rival the older form in the Edo period (1603-1867), when the great master Basho Matsuo elevated it to the level of a profoundly serious art form. It has since remained the most popular poetic form in Japan. Originally, the subject matter of haiku was restricted to an objective description of nature suggestive of one of the seasons, evoking a definite, though unstated, emotional response. Gradually, its subject range has been broadened but it remains an art of expressing much and suggesting more in the fewest possible words. Special techniques have been developed to achieve the maximum effect in the minimum words. They are the use of kireji (cutting-words), the use of kigo (seasonal words), and taigen-dome (the noun-ending).\(^4\) Over-all effect brought by such techniques is said to be an unfinished touch, which gives maximum possibility of interpretation. In other words, haiku, which is felt to be somewhat incomplete, invites a reader to complete it by his/her power of imagination.

2.1 Similarities

Now let us look at the similarities between the haiku and Frost's poem.

2.1.1 Theme -- snow and a crow

Both poems describe snow and a crow in a similar way. In both, a crow, an ill-omened bird of negative associations, gets a positive interpretation. In Frost, it is the way a crow shook the dust of snow down on the narrator that has changed the mood of his heart from rueful to uplifted. It is a paradoxical moment in life in which the negative turns into the positive. In Basho, it is suggested that there is a morning of snow, a peaceful moment, even for a usually hateful crow. Crows are noisy and hated generally. We do not normally express empathy toward them. The haiku, like Frost's poem, sets an eye on this hateful bird, and treats it with an empathic mind by putting it in the extraordinary context of a peaceful snowy morning.

The apparent contrast of snow and a crow is a common element, too, in both poems. The color -- black and white, and the value -- positive and negative. However, in Frost, "snow" can also be interpreted as a negative element by its strong association with death, which in turn was represented by "crow," "dust," and a "hemlock tree." The image of death, represented by the dust of snow from a hemlock tree, was expelled by the
action of the crow. The crow shook down the dust of snow from a hemlock tree on the narrator, but since the dust of snow never stayed there and since this can also represent the sudden removal of sorrow from the narrator’s heart, the action of the crow has given a change of mood. In Basho, "snow" does not seem to have such connotations. Instead, it is described as if the snowy morning embraces all in peace, both animal and human, the negative and the positive, in its serenity. This haiku seems to create a fresh and positive context for a commonly negative bird, which is ordinarily associated with an autumn late afternoon -- season and time, dark, cold, dying and lack of motion.

Thus in both poems, a crow, in combination with snow, gets a distinctly positive interpretation.

2.1.2 Semantics

As stated above, both poems have snow and a crow as key words, which carry connotations as follows: snow as being clean, cold, wet, frozen, and white, a color of purity, and a crow as an ugly, noisy bird of bad luck, a symbol of death. The color of the bird is black, a color of death and night. Basically the connotations are similar in both English and Japanese cultures except for the slightly different nuances described below.

"Dust" and "hemlock" are also key words to interpret Frost’s poem. "Dust" is fragile, small particles and at the same time, is dirty, and a symbol of neglect or death. "Hemlock" is an evergreen tree, the sap of which is poisonous. Again, there is an association of death implied in this word. There are possible differences in the connotations of "snow" and yuki (snow). In English, as I stated in section 2.1.1, "snow" can be a negative element. The verb "to snow," for example, has a negative meaning "to deceive." On the other hand, in Japanese, yuki has only positive connotations. Ashita (morn) is positive, too, having such associations as hope and future. The seasonal/temporal association of karasu (crow) in Japanese is an autumn late afternoon. In this haiku, this common association is broken.
2.2 Differences

Frost's poem and Basho's haiku differ in the following five factors, which frame different cognitive and aesthetic orientations of each poetic text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Robert Frost</th>
<th>Basho Matsuo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position of narrator</td>
<td>center</td>
<td>no direct mention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logic</td>
<td>cause and effect</td>
<td>juxtaposition of elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement</td>
<td>dynamic</td>
<td>static</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of representation</td>
<td>grammatical explicitness</td>
<td>grammatical vagueness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestiveness</td>
<td>eloquent</td>
<td>suggestive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Cognitive Differences

2.2.1 Position of narrator

Frost's poem describes the narrator, "I," as the center of the event. It is on "me" that a crow shook down the dust of snow; it is "my" heart where the change occurred; and it is "I" who had rued a day. The narrator is visible.

On the other hand, there is no direct mention of "I" in Basho's haiku. Two words which hint the presence of the narrator are niku (hateful) and mo (too), because "hateful" is an affective term implying an observer (i.e., the narrator), and because mo implies the empathy of the narrator toward the crow. The morning of snow not only comes to the narrator but also to the crow even if it is a hateful bird.

Furthermore, the centrality of the narrator in Frost's poem asserts itself by the way in which the first person "I" is clearly delineated from the other participant of the "event," i.e., the crow. The crow and the "I" are separate entities. The former is a doer; the latter a recipient of the action. The invisible narrator in Basho's haiku, on the contrary, seems to be treated as fused with the crow expressed by the implied empathy toward it. The world depicted by the haiku is not an ordered universe consisting of analytical parts such as the crow, the snow, the narrator, etc.,
but rather a fused continuum embracing all of nature, i.e., the oneness of the
crow, the narrator, the snow and the morning, with no clear boundaries.

2.2.2 Logic

The logical development of each poem also reflects and hence
reinforces the difference. More precisely, there is logic of cause and effect
in Frost's poem, but no such logic in Basho's. The first stanza of Frost's
poem describes the way a crow shook the snow as cause, and the second
stanza expresses a change of mood in the narrator's heart as effect,
whereas Basho's haiku is a juxtaposition of three major elements--crow,
snow, and morning. There does not even seem to be an order of these
elements, either. In other words, Frost's poem describes a world by
analytical logic, while the haiku world is non-analytic. It transcends the
logical to achieve a unitary fused whole.

2.2.3 Movement

Frost's poem depicts the scene of the dust of snow and the crow as a
dynamic movement. The crow shook a branch of a hemlock tree, and the
snow dust fell from the tree on the narrator. This whole event gave his
heart a change of mood. In contrast, Basho's haiku represents the scene of
the crow and the snowy morning as a still picture. Yuki no ashita (morning
of snow) is ambiguous as it is not clear whether it is a morning after
snowfall (i.e., the scene is covered by snow but no snow is falling now) or a
morning when it is snowing. With whichever meaning, however, the
movement is quiet and calm. To put it metaphorically, Frost's poem is a
verb poem, whereas Basho's haiku is a noun poem.

2.2.4 Mode of representation

It can also be pointed out that the poems in question use contrastively
different modes of representation. Frost's poem expresses its content with
grammatical explicitness, while Basho's haiku suggests its content with
grammatical vagueness.

The grammatical relations in "The Dust of Snow" are clear enough for
the reader to grasp at first glance. "The way" is the subject, which has
two predicates -- "has given ..." and "[has] saved ...." "A crow shook down
on me the dust of snow from a hemlock tree" is a relative adverb clause
which modifies the subject noun "the way." "I had rued" is a relative
pronoun clause which modifies the noun "a day."

On the contrary, the grammatical relations in Basho's haiku are so
ambiguous that they resist any simple grammatical analysis such as the
above effort. For example, this haiku has no verb. Higoro (usually)
nikuki (hateful) karasu (crow) and yuki (snow) no (of) ashita (morn) are
noun phrases juxtaposed by a particle mo (too, also). Kana is a kireji
(cutting-word), which functions to give an unfinished touch at the ending
of the poem. The sense of the whole poem: "[even] for a usually hateful
crow, [there is] a morning of snow, too...."

2.2.5 Suggestiveness

What I have mentioned in this section leads one to assume that
Frost's poem is more explicit in logic and grammar, and thereby expresses
meaning clearly to the reader. The reader's task then is to interpret the
world expressed by the poem with her/his imagination. On the other
hand, Basho's haiku utilizes suggestiveness by juxtaposing nominal
elements with loose grammatical relations. It implies the content but
never manifests it expressly. The haiku is a sketch which invites the
reader to complete it by the power of her/his imagination.
Incompleteness, or not saying all, is important, because that is the way to
enrich textual interpretation.

3. Haiku versions of Robert Frost's "The Dust of Snow": An Exercise

After a lecture on the similarities and the differences between the
two poems in terms of their semantic, cognitive, and aesthetic framework,
the students were asked to compose a haiku version of "The Dust of Snow."
Although English language was recommended when they composed their
versions for the sake of ease, they were asked to follow as much as possible
the cognitive and aesthetic framework of haiku that they had learned
from the comparison. The purpose of this exercise was to increase the
students' awareness of difference by recasting Frost's poem into the haiku
framework as well as to experience the creation of a haiku from an
internalized framework.

What follows is a collection of versions submitted by the students in
North America, whose native language is English, though their cultural
backgrounds vary within the Western frame of reference.
3.1 Versions by students from American cultural background

(1) A crow a dust of snow
    a change of heart
    dawns a new day

(2) Bitter day
    Saved
    By a crow

(3) The way a crow shook
    Dust of snow upon my heart
    To show me a way ....

(4) Too still too cold day
    Crow's arrival on hemlock
    Rainbow snow dust fall.

(5) Crow in hemlock tree;
    Snow gives me new meaning to day:
    No longer mournful.

(6) The crow's wings flutter
    And snow--cool, white, new--powders
    My black existence.

(7) Dark the hemlock tree
    from the long wing of the crow
    a dusting of snow
    twinges of gladdening lights

(8) Hemlock tree. A crow
    Relieves a branch of snow
    A flurry of glittering motes.
3.2 Versions by students from Canadian cultural background

(9) Crow in a hemlock,
Drops a dust of snow on me,
My heart is lifted.

(10) A crow in a hemlock
Felicitous feelings
In the snow

3.3 Version by a student from Polish cultural background

(11) From the hemlock tree
A crow stirs a dust of snow
change of mood

3.4 Version by a student from French cultural background

(12) Black crow laughing
Snow dust falling
in sorrow -- peace.

4. Conclusion: Review Analysis

By way of concluding this paper, the following section analyzes and interprets the students' versions. Further applications of the method are suggested.

4.1 Discussion

How do the haiku versions by students show what they learned and what not? Instead of commenting on each version respectively, I will summarize the main points according to the five factors of difference elaborated in section 2.2. Since the data are so few and idiosyncratic, the following discussion is intended to be illustrative and not to be exhaustive.
4.1.1 Narrator "I"

*Haiku* revisions tend to avoid mentioning the narrator "I." Only one third of the versions mention the narrator "I" (e.g., (a3), (5), (6), & (9)). Generally speaking, the versions with no mention of "I" follow the *haiku* framework more successfully than the versions with a mention of the narrator, which are more heavily influenced by Western cognitive framework. For example, versions (5) and (6) with a mention of "I" seem to philosophize the event described by their version by the use of such concealed words as "meaning" and "existence." At the same time, these versions are wordy with redundant use of adjectives such as "mournful," "cool," "white," "new," "black," etc., which contradicts the vagueness or suggestiveness of *haiku* representation. Versions (1) and (11) with no direct mention of "I," on the other hand, more effectively instantiate the stative, suggestive, and succinct mode of representation.

4.1.2 Logic of cause and effect

Some versions more strongly display logic of cause and effect than others, although two thirds of the revisions more or less imply this logic. This is probably because of the authority of the original meaning expressed by Frost. For example, versions (2), (3), (5) and (9) manifest rigid logic of cause and effect in an explicit manner, whereas versions (4), (7), (10) and (12) seem free from it. It is interesting to note, however, that the versions free from rigid logic of cause and effect do not always follow the other factors of *haiku* framework. For versions (4), (7), (10) and (12) all display plethoric expressiveness, which contradicts the aims of *haiku*, by adding rather colorful adjectives and nouns such as "rainbow," "gladdening lights," "felicitous," "laughing" and "peace."

4.1.3 Dynamic event v.s. static picture

Again, the ones with stronger logic of cause and effect depict the content as a dynamic event. Some versions, however, try to capture the event as a static picture by employing stative verbs rather than motion verbs, such as "dawn" in (1) and "relieve" in (8), or by juxtaposing nominal elements as in (10) and (12). Particularly, the use of "dawn" in version (1) and a metaphorical use of "relieve" in (8) are brilliant, because they are
used not only as a stative verb but also as a verb which requires no animate subject nor object. This contributes to the invisibility of the narrator in these two versions, as well.

It seems that the authority of the original text interfered most strongly in the process of recasting the dynamic into the static. The world described by Frost is essentially different from the world of Basho's haiku. Attitude and approach to this world are also different. The original text by Frost contains two verbs and a noun of motion, e.g., "shake," "give," and "a change." "Crow" in Frost's poem is active; it is a doer. "The dust of snow" is also moving—dynamically falling from a hemlock tree onto the narrator. The still image of a haiku version can only be possible once we view the world as an outcome which embraces all the processes behind it.

4.1.4 Grammatical explicitness v.s. vagueness

Except for a few versions, the students' versions are grammatically less explicit than the original poem by Frost. Ones which display rigid logic of cause and effect obviously bear grammatical explicitness as in versions (2), (3), (6) and (9). Students achieved greater vagueness by employing such techniques as juxtaposing nominal elements as in versions (4), (7), (10) and (12), beginning or ending their versions with an independent nominal line as in versions (1), (5), (8), and (11).

4.1.5 Verbal eloquence v.s. unstated suggestiveness

Half of the versions add extra words which are not in the original text to their versions. For example, adjectives such as "new" (1), "bitter" (2), "still" and "cold" (4), "mournful" (5), "cool," "white," "new," and "black" (6), "long" and "dark" (7), "glittering" (8), and "felicitous" (10); nouns such as "arrival," "rainbow," and "fall" (4), "meaning" (5), "wings" (6), "dusting," "twinges," and "lights" (7), "branch" and "moles" (8), "feeling" (10) and "peace" (12); verbs such as "dawn" (1), "show" (3), "flutter" (6), "relieve" (8), "drop" and "lift" (9), "stir" (11), "laughing"
and "falling" (12), etc. Particularly, redundant use of semantically related adjectives and adjectival phrases in such as "too cold day / rainbow snow dust" (4), "snow--cool, white, new" (6), and "the long wing of the crow / twinges of gladdening lights" (7) seems too wordy to fit with a haiku framework.

However, some versions show attempts to increase suggestiveness by the use of punctuation as in (3) and (5), juxtaposition as in (10) and (12), independent nominal beginning as in (1) and (5), and independent nominal ending as in (8) and (11).

4.2 Application

The question is how to use these results for teaching Japanese as a foreign language. Applications are numerous. An increase in the awareness of cultural differences will be facilitated by further discussion, by revision of the haiku according to the discussion, and/or by application to other texts or other discourse genres.

The students' versions show that they understand the cognitive framework of haiku to some degree and try to internalize it when they compose their versions. Some are more successful in this process of internalization than others. The process of composition/transposition is more important than the actual written versions, because it is in this process that the students encounter the different culture—the different cognitive and aesthetic framework of haiku.

One way of testing the understanding of students is to ask them to revise their versions, or the versions of their fellow students. It is also effective to ask them to rank the versions submitted. Here is a sample ranking by the students at Georgetown University. The 20 class members each selected three versions as best after they heard my lecture.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Version #</th>
<th># of students voting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>(10)</td>
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<td>(9)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>(2)</td>
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<td>(12)</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Ranking by the Students at Georgetown University (n. 20 x 3)

As we can easily see, the versions topping this ranking, (1) and (8), are more haiku-like than the versions of no vote, (4) and (5). It somehow puzzles me, however, that version (7) ranked high in spite of its wordiness (cf. section 4.1.5). This may have something to do with general aesthetics of English poetry, which overrides aesthetics of haiku. I do not have an answer to this question, although I fully understand it as an important issue in this kind of comparative research.

4.3 Problems

A couple of factors seem relevant in analyzing the students' difficulty in assimilating the haiku framework. One factor is the interference of English as a means of expression as well as cognitive process. Because the level of Japanese that my students have achieved was not good enough to compose haiku in Japanese, this experiment was done in English. The English haiku should have its own aesthetic framework. A haiku in English is English poetry. This does not invalidate the exercise, but points rather to the need of the teacher to find a means to help the students make
a cognitive leap (for example, giving the students aesthetic feedback from a Japanese perspective).

Another factor is the authority of the original text. It is likely that the students' perception of the central meaning of Frost's poem (i.e., the change of mood) overrides the directives for encoding meaning in haiku form. It is probably an unconscious element, but it goes against the grain to substantially alter the words of a great poet. Nevertheless, by and large, the students did a good job in understanding and internalizing the different cultural framework by this exercise.

The experiment has lead us to conclude that comparison and transposition of culturally different literary texts, between the one of one's own cultural tradition and the other of a foreign tradition, yield a rich resource to cultural education in the following three ways:

1) to enhance students awareness of the cognitive and aesthetic framework of their own culture;

2) to develop awareness of the different cognitive and aesthetic framework of a target culture which they are learning through language and literature; and

3) to create an opportunity to experience the difference by internalizing the the cognitive and aesthetic framework of a target culture.
Notes

1. A major part of this research was conducted during the tenure of a Fulbright Research Grant (1989-1990) at Cornell University. I would like to express my gratitude to Claire Kramsch for letting me experiment with the method developed in this paper, in her course at Cornell University (1989 Fall). I also want to thank Hiroko Noro and Miwa Nishimura for letting me demonstrate the content of this paper in their courses at the University of Victoria (1990 Spring), and at Georgetown University (1991 Fall) respectively. I am also indebted to the comments and questions of the students who took the courses mentioned above. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fourth International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication, San Antonio, March 1993. I would like to express my gratitude for the constructive criticisms and comments from the audience. My heartfelt thanks also go to Joanna Radwanska-Williams and Valerie Ann Wilkinson for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

2. The effectiveness and importance of using poetry in education in general and in foreign language teaching in particular has been stressed and elaborated in recent literature such as Widdowson (1975, 1992) and Kramsch (1993). Widdowson (1992: 166-178) introduces a similar method to the one developed in this paper by comparing two sets of English short poems and Japanese haiku poems. Kramsch (1993: 156-176), advocating for use of poetic texts in foreign language teaching, suggests that exploration of multiple meanings and perspectives of a poetic text by transposing it to different poetic modes is an effective method of encouraging the aesthetic reading of poetry for intermediate and advanced learners. Both Widdowson and Kramsch refer to an earlier version of this paper, entitled "Snow and crow: Basho's haiku in comparison with Robert Frost's short poem in an advanced Japanese classroom," presented at Cornell University, 1989.
3. The sessions were conducted in English at Cornell because the course was on the use of literature in language teaching and the audience consisted of foreign language teachers rather than students, whereas at the University of Victoria and Georgetown University, they were conducted in Japanese for the students in their fourth year of Japanese language learning.

4. For detailed explanation of these techniques and Basho's *haiku*, see Blyth (1952: 1-336), Henderson (1958: 1-48), and Yasuda (1957: 1-26).

5. I owe this important insight to Yasuo Isami.

6. See Sections 4.1.3 and 4.3 for further discussion.
References


LANGUAGE
AND
LITERATURE

LnL Vol. XIX 1994

Bates L. Hoffer, Editor Trinity University

ISSN 1057 6037