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Problems of Translating Culture-Bound Terms: Taking “Öffentlichkeit” and “Seken” as Examples

Tadahisa Izeki

Abstract

This working paper discusses a core issue of the Shaping Asia Network Initiative, namely the “translatability” of concepts from one language and cultural context into another. Tadahisa Izeki’s reflections address a very familiar concept in German and Western languages: Öffentlichkeit or public sphere (a key term in the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas). Taking the reader in a journey through the endeavour of translating this term into Japanese language, it becomes clear that the chosen Japanese translation words have different connotations. Hence, Öffentlichkeit and its lingual counterpart(s) in Japan are culture-bound terms and vary in meaning.

For readers of Japanese, the most interesting quotes from the literature have kindly been provided by the author in the Japanese original, too.

Key words: Cultural-bound terms, Translatability, Öffentlichkeit, Seken, Kugai, Kōkyōken, Shakai

Introduction

It used to be obvious that you cannot translate a word or a phrase into another language without considering its cultural and historical backgrounds, because each language has its own categorization of meaning. Therefore, a culture-specific word should not be translated into a similar word of another language but should be translated with a short explanation and annotation. However, because of the development of digital technology, e.g. internet, Social Networking System (SNS) and Artificial Intelligence, more and more people think today that they can translate a word into another language automatically without understanding cultural differences.

In the following I would like to discuss the difficulties in translating culture-bound terms such as the German word “Öffentlichkeit” and the Japanese word “seken (世間)”. These words have something to do with “public” or “society”, and there are also cases in which “Öffentlichkeit” is translated into “seken”. However, they have completely different cultural and historical backgrounds, so that it cannot be that easy to translate them into other languages.

1. What is “Öffentlichkeit”?

1.1. *Habermas’s concept of “Öffentlichkeit”*

The German term “Öffentlichkeit”, accompanied by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas’s discourse and translated usually into the English term “public sphere”, is difficult to translate into Japanese because of the difference between Japanese and European histories. In his work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere), which was published in 1962, Habermas presents the public sphere as a category of bourgeois society. According to Habermas, modern Western Europe began with a separation between the sphere of public authority and private realm. The public sphere as an ideal type was set up in the private realm, in other words, the internal space of bourgeois intellectuals (intimate sphere).

The public sphere was coextensive with public authority, and we consider the court part of it. Included in the private realm was the authentic “public sphere”, for it was a public sphere constituted by private people. Within the realm that was the preserve of private people we therefore distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor; imbedded in it was the family with its interior domain (Intimsphäre). The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in

the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society (Habermas 1991, 30-31).

According to Habermas, first, the literary public sphere was enacted in the coffee houses, salons and clubs. Newspapers emerged at the same time, providing a medium for public discourse. Then this sphere was developed into the political public sphere such as a political party. In the bourgeois revolution the public sphere broke through its boundaries and into the realm of public authority. The concept of the public sphere is thus defined as a free communication space and its principle is the ideal of public discourse. This concept of the public sphere forms also the core of his democratic theory in which reflexivity and deliberation play a central role (Goode 2005, 120-122).

About 30 years after the publication of the book, the Middle and East European Revolution of 1989/90 had an enormous impact on Habermas' idea of "public sphere" and "civil society". He prepared a new preface to the new German edition of his work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* without renewing the content. In this new preface, in which he discussed rediscovery of civil society, he used the word "Zivilgesellschaft" for civil society instead of "bürgerliche Gesellschaft (civil/bourgeois society)". In the process of the Middle and East European Revolution, the terms "public sphere" and "civil society" were used by the civil rights activists and Habermas emphasized therefore the idea of reconstructing and reactivating the political public sphere for civil society (Habermas 1990, 45-50; Hanada 2020a, 012). As Habermas says:

The concept of civil society owes its rise in favor to the criticism leveled, especially by dissidents from state-socialist societies, against the totalitarian annihilation of the political public sphere. Here Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism, with its focus on communication, plays an important role. It provides the foil that makes it understandable why the opinion-shaping associations, around which autonomous public spheres can be built up, occupy such a prominent place in the civil society. It is precisely this communicative praxis on the part of citizens that, in totalitarian regimes, is subjected to the control of the secret police. The revolutionary changes in eastern and central Europe have confirmed these analyses (Habermas 1999, 454).

Thus, the German term "Öffentlichkeit, which is spread by the sociologist Habermas in human and social sciences, has European cultural and historical backgrounds, and its implications could be changed by influence of historical events still today.

1.2. “Kugai”: A similar term for “Öffentlichkeit” in medieval Japan

According to the Japanese sociologist Tatsuro Hanada, there used to be a similar term for the public sphere in medieval Japan, and this lost public sphere was called “kugai (公界)”. “Ku (公)” means “public” and “gai/kai (界)” means “realm” or “world”, so “kugai” refers to the “public realm”. The origin of the “kugai” is connected with the concept of “urbanization”. According to the historian Yoshihiko Amino, there are three elements characterizing urban place in medieval Japan: “kugai (公界: public realm)” as a spatial concept, “muen (無縁: unboundness)” as a relational concept, and “raku (楽: fairgrounds)” as a utopian concept (Amino 1996, 110-123).

Amino says that “muen” means being unconnected or unbound. It refers to the absence of ownership and obligation. The place where “muen” flourishes is the “kugai”, which includes such places as cemeteries, roads, temples, and markets. It encompasses the sacred lands of the gods such as forests, mountains, wilderness oceans, riverbanks, and the borderlands between the spiritual and mundane worlds. In these sites, markets were established, and various open-air entertainments were performed. The agents of “kugai”, “kugai-mono (公界者)”, were not the settled peasants but nomads such as artisans, diviners, monks, charity organizers and entertainers. These agents were affiliated with Buddhism, Shintoism, and the emperor. People believed that they had both special skills and connections to the sacred and spiritual world. Hence, the agents could operate autonomously in the “kugai” (Hanada 2020d, 090-092).

“Raku”, which means pleasure, comfort, and ease, refers to a utopian space where the principal of “kugai” and “muen” realized in medieval Japan. Its concrete manifestation was in the fairgrounds where trading, public entertainments and ritual activities took place freely. In those places around marketplaces, independent towns developed at first. At such places, charitable contributions were also solicited (“kanjin”: 勧進). “Kanjin” was conducted by charity monks, who were called “kanjin-hijiri (勧進聖)”, for public concerns such as bridge building and famine relief. The place where the “kanjin” was held was called “sajiki (棧敷)”, which means spectator gallery and was characterized by the cohabitation of the wealthy and the poor (Hanada 2020c, 70-82; Higashijima 2000, 31-59).

According to Amino, the actualization of the principles of “muen”, “kugai” and “raku” in medieval warring states period (1467-1568) came with the construction of autonomous towns. The public authority of Nobunaga Oda and Hideyoshi Toyotomi in the late 16th century

crushed “kugai” and brought the autonomous towns under their control. They absorbed them into the castle towns of the warlords. After that the word “kugai” was used for the smaller autonomic places where the power of the public authority could not reach, such as red-light districts called “yukaku (遊郭)” in Yoshiwara/Tokyo. However, this was not a “kugai (公界)” as a “public realm” any more but a “kugai (苦界)” as a “painful world” for the prostitutes who were forced to work there (Amino 2001, 173). Thus, the “kugai” transformed in the Edo-era into a small realm which was isolated from the “seken”. As a result, the word “kugai” was dropped from the Japanese language.

Although the historical contexts, in which the modern European public sphere and the Japanese medieval concept of “kugai” emerged, are obviously different, Hanada points out resemblances between them: They both have a close connection with urbanization. However, he also points out crucial differences between them. The public sphere in Western Europe was developed by the bourgeoisie who lived in towns, in other words, the public sphere was produced from towns. By contrast, the “kugai” in Japan produced towns. Hanada summarizes this difference as follows:

Although towns were formed from or with *kugai* in the Japanese context, the public sphere was formed from towns in Europe. The relationship is the reverse, since *kugai* gave rise to towns in Japan, but towns gave rise to the public sphere in the Western context. Unlike the public sphere, *kugai* was after its birth neither conceptualized nor institutionalized and was thus unable to survive. This is perhaps a result of its failing to eliminate Eros. The public sphere, on the other hand, (...) strengthened the Logos that led to conceptualization and institutionalization and promoted its development as a political entity (Hanada 2020c, 076).

Another difference between the public sphere and the “kugai” is in their relation to religion. The rise of the public sphere was associated with the process of secularization, and its concept is based on rational discourse. By contrast, the “kugai” was organized as sacred sites and had connection to religions like Buddhism and Shintoism.

Kugai, which first originated as sacred sites and then came to inherit and include them, has a strong connection to Buddhism, Shintoism, and the emperor. In terms of the modern Western context, it had not yet undergone desecralization. What kugai lacked was a logic that had castaway superstition, a means for secularization, and a mechanism for linking the sacred and the secular. In contrast, the cultivation that served as the impetus for the

formation of the public sphere was the culture of the Enlightenment and the desacralization of the intellect. From this began the process of rationalization in modern Europe (Hanada 2020c, 077-078).

The third difference is related to the matter of private property. As a social space of the bourgeoisie, the public sphere was connected to the private ownership of property. However, the “kugai” was based on the absence of property ownership, as is expressed in the concept of “muen”. The “muen” was a strategy for achieving freedom from the public authority.

The unboundness and lack of property in the Japanese Middle Ages was a strategy for achieving freedom from the ties of community functioning as public authority through the breakup of communal property. For Europe on the eve of modernity, private property was a strategy for achieving freedom from the ties of community or state functioning as public authority through the assertion of private autonomy from communal property. In short, the form of property opposed to communal property in medieval Japan appeared as a renunciation of property, while the form of property opposed to communal property in Europe appeared as private property (Hanada 2020c, 077).

However, Hanada points out a potential of “muen” (unboundness) as a form of inter-subjectivity in today’s capitalistic society and asks himself as follows:

Is it perhaps possible to find a model for public autonomy based on a concept of interactive subjectivity or inter-subjectivity, rather than the dominant individualistic bourgeois subjectivity of the present day? Might we rediscover a concept of muen (unboundness) in the future? Despite its eclipse as a result of the historical process, any remaining latent potential of the Kugai is perhaps worth remembering and exploring for the future (Hanada 2020d, 093).

As seen above, both terms “Öffentlichkeit” and “kugai” have resemblances although there are enormous crucial and historical differences between them. Naturally, it is not possible to use “kugai” as translation for “Öffentlichkeit”. We need a completely new Japanese word for it.

1.3. “*Kōkyōken*”: A new translation for “*Öffentlichkeit*”

Modern Japanese society has not developed Habermas’ “Öffentlichkeit” (public sphere), which functioned as an open place for free critical communication. In the process of modernization after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the public authority, which was connected to the emperor system, enclosed the public realm. In other words, the public realm in modern Japan was

distorted by the emperor system. Hereby, there has been no Japanese word for the public sphere.

In Japan the meaning of the “public” is still ambiguous because public space is not associated with the private realm but with the public authority or the state. In the 1990s the sociologist Tatsuro Hanada proposed the new word “kōkyōken (公共圏)” as a translation for “Öffentlichkeit”. Today, “kōkyōken” could be a terminology used in sociology and political science, but this has not been in common use yet. According to Hanada, “kōkyōken” is completely different from the common Japanese word “kōkyō-kūkan (公共空間)” which means public space. Hanada explains the difference between both words as follows:

For example, parks and streets obviously constitute public space, but they are not in themselves the public sphere. The information superhighway, whose name employs a metaphor for inter-State highways, is a “virtual” public space, and the space created by the World Wide Web (WWW) called cyberspace is also public space, but neither is in itself the public sphere. Public space and the public sphere do have some overlap, but are fundamentally different. Because there is a difference, it is necessary to have a separate term for public sphere. (...) As an ideal type formed by this historical process, the public sphere developed out of the freedom, equality and fraternity of the intimate sphere. Its underlying principle was a norm of communication that emphasised the openness of discourse and commonality with diverse others. (...) What is significant about the concept of the public sphere is that it has the dual character of being both a normative and an actual condition (Hanada 2020b, 57-59).

As described above, the equivalent of the German concept “Öffentlichkeit” could be the Japanese historical concept “kugai”, which was developed from the private realm and existed only during the medieval period. Such a public realm cannot be found in Modern Japan. Therefore, it was necessary to create a new Japanese term “kōkyōken” as translation for “Öffentlichkeit”.

2. What is “seken”?

2.1. “Seken” in Japanese history

The Japanese word “seken” is often translated into terms like society, world, public, people or others, but none of these reflects the characteristic of Japanese closed community. “Seken” does not mean a society, which consists of individuals, but the traditional framework of Japanese people’s life.

First of all, “seken” is originally a Buddhist word and a translation of Sanskrit “loka (路迦 in ancient Chinese)” which means “what has been denied and broken” (Abe 1995, 50). According to the social psychologist Tadashi Inoue, the original meaning of “se (世)” is “time” and also “what comes and goes by the minute” in ancient Chinese. The original meaning of “ken (間)” is “space” of a material and not material world. Therefore, “seken” used to mean an imperfect and transient world. After “seken” has lost its meaning of “time” and became a daily language as a “space” for mortal people, it still included such a transient element. In “Manyōshū (万葉集)”, the oldest collection of Japanese poetry from the 8th century, “seken” appears, but it is read as “yononaka (世の中)”, which has a more Japanese element than an ancient Chinese one (both “間 (between)” and “中 (in)” mean “space”). Both “seken” and “yononaka” became popular words for living place for this world, and the idiomatic expressions like “seken ni deru (世間に出る)” (go out into “seken”) and “seken wo wataru (世間を渡る)” (go across “seken”) mean since then to live in this world (Inoue 2007, 32-40). Inoue says as follows:

According to the Buddhist concept, everyone “goes out into seken” just after birth. To live a life is nothing but to “go across seken”. Where does one arrive subsequently after “going across seken”? The place where one arrives is, needless to say, the “next world”. However, today almost no one “goes across seken” thinking of the “next world”. It is not strange to think that the Buddhist meaning has been dropped from the word “seken”. (...) “Seken” gradually became a word to express quite a human relationship. This is why we never say “go out into seken” just after birth today. People could “go out into seken” and start to “go across seken” only after they became independent from their parents. Today, the word “seken” is so common in Japan that no one believes that “seken” used to be a Buddhist concept (Inoue 2007, 35-36, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

仏教用語にしたがえば、人は、生まれおちたときから、「世間に出る」ことになる。人生をおくることは、「世間を渡る」ことにほかならない。「世間」を渡って、人はいったい、どこへ行きつくのであろうか。行きつく先は、いうまでもなく、〈あの世〉である。しかし、今日では、あの世に思いをはせて「世間」を渡る人など、ほとんどあるまい。「世間」ということばから、いつしか、仏教的な意味あいが脱落していったとしても、不思議はない。(中略)「世間」はしだいに、はなはだ人間くさい関係をあらわすことばとして、もちいられるようになったのである。その証拠には、私たちは日常用語として、人が生まれおちたときから「世間に出る」とは、けっしていわない。人が「世間に出る」のは、少なくとも、親がかりの生活から離れてのちのことである。そのと

きはじめて、人は、「世間」に出ることができる。そして、「世間」を渡りはじめることになるのだ。

もはや今日のわが国では、もとは仏教用語であったということが、にわかには信じがたい（井上 2007, 35-36）。

According to Inoue, it was in the 17th century, the early Edo-era (1603-1868), that the prototype of today's "seken", as a place of interpersonal relationship, was made. Before that, the word "kugai (公界)", which means public realm for entertainment and performance as discussed in the previous chapter, was used more generally than "seken".

In the early Edo-era, "seken" was a small lifeworld for each class. Merchants, the central figures of the Edo culture, used the word "ukiyo (浮世)" as "seken". "Ukiyo" meant originally Buddhist "transitory world" ("ukiyo": 憂き世), but in the Edo-era tradesmen used the same word "ukiyo (浮世)" as a floating world of love and money. "Ukiyo-e" (a picture of the floating world) comes from this "ukiyo". "Ukiyo" means therefore a hedonistic world of merchant culture in the Edo-era. For merchants in the Edo-era, the place where they worked was home ("uchi": 家) and the outdoors ("soto": 外) was "seken" (Inoue 2007, 52-68). For peasants, "seken" was a place outside their farmland or home village ("mura": 村/ムラ). In the 18th century, the late Edo-era, the peasants began to go on a trip and the "seken" became larger for them. From that time on "know seken" ("seken wo shiru": 世間を知る) was very important for the peasants to become independent. Thus, there were many kinds of "seken", and these were becoming larger and larger since Edo-era.

The samurai class had another image of "seken". For them, the household ("ie": 家) was a kind of small "seken". Each samurai had to obey his household, and the family had to obey the community. This hierarchical "ie"-system expanded all over Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which brought about the end of the samurai class and the modernization and Westernization of Japan. In the Meiji-era (1868-1912), the Japanese emperor "tennō (天皇)" and the state were at the top of this hierarchical system. In this family-state-ideology, the people had to obey the household and the small "seken" around the household. The small "seken" had to obey the large "seken", but there were also conflicts between the two. The influence of Western idea of the "self" and individualism caused a conflict between the household/"seken" on one hand and individuals on the other (Inoue 2007, 68-92).

The "seken" also has been playing a role in the development of self-control. Japanese people feel that the "seken's" eyes ("seken no me": 世間の目) always watch them, and

therefore people always pay attention to the “seken”. During World War II, state control was strengthened, and the family-state-ideology was also emphasized to control the whole nation. The control system by the “seken’s” eyes were used to the fullest extent by the government as “tonarigumi (隣組)”, which means a neighborhood association for controlling the neighbor’s behavior to support the national mobilization for the war. As a feudal local semi-governmental, semi-civilian organization, “tonarigumi” controlled people’s private lives, activities and ideas efficiently and limited privacy of individuals strictly (Watanabe 2013, 18-20).

As follows, Inoue asserts that the conflict between “seken” and individuals still exists in the post-war Japan although the family-state-ideology collapsed, because the “seken” has not disappeared but has kept diversifying:

Generally speaking, the family-state-ideology collapsed after Japan lost World War II. The ideology which had regulated people’s view of “seken” from above has finally collapsed. It could be said that the tendency of diversification of the view of “seken” was a logical result. Instead, conflicts about the view of “seken” among the people inevitably came to the surface. At this moment, it looks like the “seken” has become a more and more ambiguous and mysterious thing. Paying attention to the “seken” provokes a kind of fear, so you can call it “fear of seken”. In order to avoid the “fear of seken”, you should commit yourself to certain common adaptive criteria. It is not strange that the criteria set by the large “seken” have been found in the “public opinion” shaped by the mass media. On the other hand, there are still many people who are obsessed with the small “seken”. This is the reason why there is no limit to the number of various tragicomedies that takes place still today in Japan (Inoue 2007, 95-96, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

一般的にいえば、家族国家観イデオロギーは、太平洋戦争の敗戦とともに崩壊した。民衆の「世間」観を上から秩序づけていたイデオロギーが、ようやく崩壊したのである。「世間」観の多様化の傾向は当然の成りゆきであった、といわなければならない。それとひきかえに、人びとのあいだで、「世間」観の葛藤が表面化してきたとしても、それはやむをえないのであった。

この期におよんで、「世間」はますます漠然とした、得体の知れない存在になってきたとの感がふかい。こんなく世間>への気づかいは、まさに一種の不安であり、「世間不安」とよぶにふさわしい。「世間不安」からのがれるためには、比較的確固たる、なんらかの共通性をもった適応規準にコミットしなければならぬ。のちにふたたびふれるように、「ひろい世間」の適応規準が、マスコミによってつくり出される<世論>にもとめられるようになったとしても、不思議はないであろう。その反面、相かわらず、「せまい世間」にとらわ

れている人たちも多い。今日では、枚挙にいとまのないほどに、さまざまの悲喜劇がたえない理由である（井上 2007, 95-96）。

Furthermore, Inoue points out that Japanese people are always careful not to act against the “seken’s” standard and have to be concerned about “sekentei (世間体)”, which means how they appear to the “seken”. It is not good for Japanese people to be extreme (good or bad) in the “seken”, so they try not to be outstanding, but to be average (“seken-nami”: 世間なみ) (Inoue 2007, 40-50). Inoue describes the way of living for Japanese people as follows:

The trick to “going across seken” most wisely would be to live a “seken”-average life in all ways, because you do not need to be ashamed as long as you follow the criteria of the “seken in general” shrewdly. Conversely, if you live “away from seken”, you have to live a sad life as a narrow-minded and eccentric person. (...) It is no exaggeration to say that the energy for working hard to live a “seken”-average life has been a mental driving force for the modernization of Japan. On the other hand, it was very rare for outsiders to show their bold energy, because it has been highly shameful to be extremely conspicuous in the “seken”, for better or worse (Inoue 2007, 50-51, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

「世間」をもっとも賢明に渡るコツは、すべてにわたって、「世間なみ」に生きることであろう。〈世間一般〉の例を規準にして、それを抜け目なく遵守していさえすれば、人は、はずかしい思いをしなくてもすむからである。反対に、「世間ばなれ」したら、人は、へんくつな恋わり者としての、さみしい生涯をおくらねばならない。（中略）この「世間なみ」に生きようがんばるエネルギーが、わが国の近代化のひとつの精神的な原動力となってきたといっても、けっして過言ではあるまい。その反面、異端のもつ大胆なエネルギーが発揮されることは、きわめてまれであった。ことの善悪をとわず、自分だけがとびぬけて目立つということは、「世間」の手前、すぐれて気はずかしいことではなければならなかったからである（井上 2007, 50-51）。

As described above, the “seken” has formed central norms of Japanese people’s life since the 17th century. Therefore, “seken” is a representative example of Japanese history- and culture-specific words.

2.2. Characteristics of “seken”

According to the historian Kinya Abe, who compared German and Japanese medieval period and founded “seken”-studies, there was no Japanese word for society until the Meiji-era, the late 19th century. It was just in the late 1870s that the English word “society” was translated into Japanese (“shakai”: 社会) for the first time. It was also in the mid-1880s that the English

word “individual” was translated into Japanese (“kojin”: 個人) for the first time (Abe 2014, 86).

Since then, people in Japan have been using this word although there is still no society in its original sense, only traditional “seken” which is not based on individuals. Abe defines a “seken” as a generic term for the whole people with whom the one has or will have an interest in. Basically a “seken” consists of homogeneous population without any foreigners and has therefore a discriminatory and exclusive character (Abe 2005, 7-8). Abe explains the difference between “seken” and society concretely as below.

The difference between “seken” and society is that Japanese people regard a “seken” as an unchangeable and given thing. Generally, a society can be reformed and therefore changeable, but a “seken” is not regarded as changeable. In a modern system people talk about the idea of social change. However, most Japanese people feel like giving up and think that nothing is changeable, because the “seken”, which has been unchangeable in the Japanese historical and traditional system, is still dominant. (...) As the concept of “society” was brought to Japan in the Meiji-era, the Western European history had already shown the way to change a society by gathering the will of the individuals. On the other hand, the way to change a “seken” has never been shown and therefore a “seken” has been understood as an unchangeable thing, which the will of the people cannot influence, as if it were given from heaven (Abe 2001, 111-112, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

「世間」と社会の違いは、「世間」が日本人にとっては変えられないものとされ、所与とされている点である。社会は改革が可能であり、変革しうるものとされているが、「世間」を変えるという発想はない。近代的システムのもとでは社会改革の思想が語られるが、他方で「なにも変わりはない」という諦念が人々を支配しているのは、歴史的・伝統的システムのもとで変えられないものとしての「世間」が支配しているためである。(中略) 明治以降わが国に導入された社会という概念においては、西欧ですでに個人との関係が確立されていたから、個人の意志が結集されれば社会を変えることができるという道筋は示されていた。しかし「世間」については、そのような道筋は全く示されたことがなく、「世間」は天から与えられたもののごとく個人の意志ではどうにもならないものと受けとめられていた(阿部 2001, 111-112)。

Abe points out also that the “seken” is exclusive and discriminatory, because Japanese people have given the “seken’s” interests the highest priority. In this sense there are no individuals in the “seken”. The “seken” was originally an aggregation of the people who were not discriminated. The law of “seken” is that they may not hurt “seken’s” reputation, which is more important for Japanese people than protecting their own reputation. This is why the

Japanese people try not to disturb the “seken”. If they should disturb the “seken” (“seken wo sawagaseru”: 世間を騒がせる), they immediately have to apologize to the “seken”, even if they are innocent. Abe describes this in the following passage:

When political or business leaders are suspected of a crime of some sort, they often say, “I am innocent but I will nevertheless apologize to the seken for disturbing.” It is almost impossible to translate this sentence into English or German. Western people would fight until others are convinced of their innocence, if they are really innocent. But Japanese people apologize to the “seken” for causing trouble. You cannot understand this as long as you consider “seken” as society. “Seken” is not society but a relatively small circle of interpersonal relationship, which one joins in. Even if you are innocent, you should apologize to the people of the “seken” to which you belong for any inconvenience the suspicion against you may have caused. Japanese people give “seken’s” reputation higher priority than their own reputation (Abe 1995, 20-21, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

政治家や財界人などが何らかの嫌疑をかけられたとき、しばしば「自分は無実だが、世間を騒がせたことについては謝罪したい」と語ることがある。この言葉を英語やドイツ語などに訳すことは不可能である。西欧人なら、自分が無実であるならば人々が自分の無実を納得するまで闘うということになるであろう。ところが日本人の場合、世間を騒がせたことについて謝罪することになる。このようなことは、世間を社会と考えている限り理解できない。世間は社会ではなく、自分が加わっている比較的小さな人間関係の環なのである。自分は無罪であるが、自分が疑われたというだけで、自分が一員である環としての自分の世間の人々に迷惑がかかることを恐れて、謝罪するのである。日本人は自分の名誉より世間の名誉の方を大事にしているのである（阿部 1995, 20-21）。

The law of “seken” brought a kind of pressure to conform (“douchou-atsuryoku”: 同調圧力), and outsiders have been always excluded. In this way, each member of the “seken” gets lost in a group.

According to Abe, other features of the “seken” are the etiquette of exchanging gifts and the sharing of time sense. People in the “seken” do not have individual time. They must share the time feelings. This is the reason why Japanese people always express their gratitude also for the future and the past to confirm that they share the time of “seken”:

There is a peculiar Japanese greeting which does not exist in Western countries like “I appreciate your support also in the future (今後ともよろしく申し上げます)”. Because Japanese people live in the “seken” sharing the time sense, they think that they will have an opportunity to meet the person soon again who they have met at the first time. In

contrast, in Western countries each one lives in his or her own time, so Western people do not have such a common time sense. In connection with this, there is another unique Japanese greeting like “Thank you for the other day (先日は有難うございました)”. This expression does not exist in Western countries either. Western people offer their thanks on each occasion and do not have the habit of expressing their gratitude for what happened before. In other words, “I appreciate your support also in the future” is an advance payment of gratitude and “Thank you for the other day” is a deferred payment of gratitude (Abe 2014, 91, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

日本人の挨拶に「今後ともよろしく申し上げます」という挨拶があるが、これは日本特有のものであって、欧米にはそれに当たる挨拶はない。なぜなら日本人は「世間」という共通の時間の中で生きているので、初対面の人でも何時かまた会う機会があると思っている。しかし欧米の人は一人一人の時間を生きているので、そのような共通の時間意識はない。これと関連して日本では「先日は有難うございました」という挨拶がしばしば交わされる。しかし同じ挨拶は欧米にはないのである。欧米ではそのときのお礼はそのときにするものであって、遑ってお礼をいう習慣はない。日本の「今後ともよろしく」という挨拶がお礼の先払いであるとする、「先日は有難う」という挨拶は過去の行為に対するお礼の後払いということになる(阿部 2014, 91)。

Furthermore, Abe explains that “seken” is therefore not the “public (公共)” in Western sense, and that the public itself used to be associated with the authorities in Japan:

In Japanese history “seken” played the role of the public in a broad sense. However, that was not the public in Western Europe where the individuals are the subjects, but it was something to keep the aggregation of persons who have their own place. The “ōyake (公)”, the public in Japanese, means a big house originally and arrives at the Japanese emperor in the end. This is very different from Western Europe. Still today, Japanese people use the word public mainly for the matters of bureaucracy or government. “Seken” is not the public for the people (Abe 2014, 91, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

「世間」は広い意味で日本の公共性の役割を果たしてきたが、西欧のように市民を主体とする公共性ではなく、人格ではなく、それぞれの場をもっている個人の集合体として全体を維持するためのものである。公共性という言葉は公として日本では大きな家という意味であり、最終的には天皇に帰着する性格をもっている。そこに西欧との大きな違いがある。現在でも公共性という場合、官を意味する場合が多い。「世間」は市民の公共性とはなっていないのである(阿部 2014, 91)。

Thus, “seken” is completely different from “Öffentlichkeit” as “public sphere”. In the human and social sciences, it is not correct, to translate “Öffentlichkeit” into “seken” or the other way around. According to Abe, “seken” has, moreover, rules of seniority, collectivism and a fusion of the sacred and the profane, which distinguish “seken” from society. In this sense, people in “seken” are also different from “peers” or “fellow human beings”. Unlike society, “seken” is the world of interpersonal relationship, which one joins in, and the word “seken” is used from a subjective perspective in principle. Still today, “shakai” as a translation word for society is just conceptual for Japanese people, while “seken” is the real one for them (Abe 2019, 15-17).

2.3. “Seken” in today’s Japan

First of all, the sociologist Hiyoshi Nakamura points out a superficial ramification and diversification of “seken” as a trend, and suggests the importance of “seken” in today’s Japan.

It is true that less and less people use the word “seken” in today’s everyday life compared with 100 or 200 years ago. However, just because people avoid using the word "seken" it does not mean the so-called "seken"-phenomena has disappeared. In the international political scene, business scene of companies, or in everyday life of people, it is often said “Because people around me/us say so”. I think, this means the trend and effect of the “seken” that each person imagines. It is true that the “seken” has been ramified and diversified. However, it seems that the interaction between “I” inside of the individual and “seken” in social life (...) still clearly has an influence on both “I” and “seken” (Nakamura 2011, 157-158, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

100年や200年以前と比べれば、現代の社会生活場面では、「世間」という言葉が用いられることは極めて少なくなっていることは事実なのですが、それは、ただその「世間」という表現を避けているだけで、現代にいわゆる世間現象が生じなくなったわけではないように思われます。国際関係や政治の場面、企業の営業方針、個人の日常の社会生活などで、「周りがそのように言っているから」と言われているのは、要するにそれぞれが描いている「世間」の動向であり、その働きなのではないでしょうか。たしかに、「世間」は細分化され多様化してきているのは事実ですが、それぞれに成立している個人内の「私」と社会生活場面内での「世間」との交流は、(中略) 厳然と「私」にも「世間」にも影響しているように思えるのですが、いかがでしょうか？(中村 2011, 157-158)

The jurist and critic Naoki Sato, who analysed the “seken” from the perspective of phenomenology (Sato 2001; Sato 2008), asserts that Japanese people still believe a “seken” is a given thing, so they cannot change it by themselves, while a “society”, which consists of

individuals, is changeable by the people. Recently, in the time of the COVID-19-pandemic, Japanese people still tried not to disturb the “seken”, and this is the reason why famous persons often apologized on TV to the “seken” for disturbing when they were infected with Coronavirus.

In Japan illness is regarded as an evil, and infected persons and their family are regarded as criminals. Infected persons and their family are forced to apologize to the “seken”, even if they are hardly responsible for the infection. (...) In fact, wearing a mask became widespread in Japan because of the peculiar awareness of hygiene, which comes from the magical thinking to protect the clearness of inside from the dirty world of outside. But we may not forget how strong the pressure to conform is, which produces discrimination and bashing (Kokami/Sato 2020, 119-120, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

[佐藤]日本では、あたかも病気＝悪であるかのように、感染者が犯罪者のようにみなされてしまう。責任があるとは到底思えないのに、感染者やその家族は「世間」への謝罪を強いられるんですね。（中略）じつは日本でマスク着用が広がったのは、ソトのケガした世界からウチの清浄さを守るという、呪術性からくる独特の衛生観念があるからなんですね。しかしその背後には、差別やバッシングを生み出す同調圧力の強さがあることを忘れてはならないと思います（鴻上・佐藤 2020, 119-120）。

Because of the strong pressure from the “seken” to conform, Japanese people watch each other voluntarily, as if the “tonarigumi” system in wartime still existed, and do not hold demonstrations against Corona measures of the government. Sato concludes that a “seken” will never become a “society” in Japan (Kokami/Sato 2020, 145-149).

Like Sato, the author and director Shoji Kokami points out that even politicians like former prime minister Shinzo Abe consider the Japanese state as an expansion of their own “seken”, so they only care about their supporters (“seken”) and have no interest in other opinions in “society”, i. e. outside of their “seken”. If they oppose the government, they are immediately bashed by pro-government supporters for hurting the “feeling” of governmental “seken”.

Japan as “society” exists outside of “seken”, but for Prime Minister Abe, Japan is nothing but expansion of his own “seken”. (...) It is not the first time that I got flamed for being “anti-government” or “anti-establishment”. On the other hand, I have not seen any celebrities who got flamed for being pro-government. It is because the Japanese

government is also a large “seken” and it is safer to be on that side. If you make a demand on the government or say something against the government, you are easily bashed for hurting the feeling of the community (Kokami and Sato 2020, 145-147, translated by the author).

Japanese original:

[鴻上]「世間」の外側にあるのは日本という「社会」ですが、安倍首相にとっては、その日本という存在も自分の「世間」を大きく広げたものでしかないということですね。（中略）[鴻上]別にいまに始まったことではありませんが、何度か僕は「反政府」「反体制」みたいな文脈で炎上しています。一方で、体制側というか、政府擁護の発言をして炎上した芸能人はほとんど見ませんよね。政府ってのも大きな「世間」ですから、そっちに身を置いておくほうが安心するというのはあるでしょう。政府に注文したり、反対意見を述べたりするのは、共同体の感情を傷つけたということで、バッシングを浴びる傾向がありますね（鴻上・佐藤 2020, 145-147）。

As seen above, we cannot equate “seken” with “society” where the dignity of the individuals is respected at least in principle. “Seken” is a world of interpersonal relationship and at the same time a norm of the Japanese people. People are always afraid of the “seken” and must apologise once they have disturbed it regardless if they are to blame or not. In principle, “seken” is not a universal thing but differs according to a lifeworld of each person. “Seken” is an element of Japanese uniqueness, and it is therefore hardly possible to explain the “seken” rationally with Western concepts.

3. Conclusion

Both “Öffentlichkeit” and “seken” are very similar to each other. The German word “Öffentlichkeit” is sometimes even translated into the Japanese word “seken”. However, the equation of both words causes huge misunderstandings because they have completely different cultural and historical backgrounds and have therefore very different implications. “Seken” is neither society nor public sphere, and “Öffentlichkeit” is not the Japanese “public”, which Japanese people often associate with the public authorities. It is similar to “kugai”, which was developed from the private realm and existed only during the medieval period.

Thus, it is difficult to translate such culture-specific words into other languages because these words reflect the historically shaped way of thinking and living. Those words should not be translated into similar words of other languages easily. It is better either to use the original word as it is with a short explanation and annotation at its first appearance or to create a new term or jargon for the word.

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