

Essays

Word Choice in English-Language Haiku: The Use of Foreign Words

David Grayson, Alameda, CA

As befits such a short form, word choice is of capital importance in haiku. As a haiku poet explores the best words for a poem, it's not surprising that occasionally he or she will land upon a non-English word. Sometimes a poet will determine that a foreign word better conveys the intended meaning than an English one, or perhaps adds an association that English cannot. In a world where cross-fertilization between languages is commonplace, haiku poets can turn to an expanded poetic "inventory" to create their work.

Not surprisingly, one topic in which other languages are used is travel. These two haiku, from the quartet "Four Rome Haiku" by Dietmar Tauchner, are examples:¹

curia
the constant chatter
of tourist tongues

a downpour
cleans the *via del corso*
of people

The Italian words in these haiku instantly transport the reader to the city of Rome. It's important to note that the words that Tauchner chooses to retain in Italian are Italian-specific. The *Via del Corso* is a historic thoroughfare in central Rome; *curia* refers to the organization of the Vatican. These unique local terms help draw the reader into the experience.

Ash Wednesday—
carrying a *retablo*
through the pelting rain²

In this poem by Patricia Machmiller, the word *retablo* (a Latin American term referring to a small religious painting, often used in home altars)³ roots the haiku in a place. It evokes a cultural event for the reader. If Machmiller had substituted an English word for the original Spanish, the haiku would not be as effective. A close equivalent in English (“reredos”) is derived from the Latin and is too formal; there is no colloquial counterpart. A more informal phrase, for instance “religious altar painting,” would be unwieldy.

In all three examples, it’s clear how important sound is in the experience of a poem. These words stand out because their sounds are so distinct from those of English. This quality helps to remove the reader from his or her local environment and jar them into another world.

Beyond subjects like travel and culture, a non-English word can add a layer of meaning to any subject, as in this poem by Bill Kenney:

la petite mort . . .
as though I could
live forever⁴

The French phrase is literally translated as “the little death,” but, as many readers know, refers to an orgasm. The phrase is the linchpin of the poem: it sets the rhythm in place and confers a playfulness. If Kenney had instead used the English “orgasm,” the poem would not be as lighthearted. Moreover, *la petite mort* adds an association that the English counterparts do not. The literal meaning of “mort” is death. Behind the light tone of the haiku stands an allusion to the cycle of sex, birth, and death.

English-language haiku can also accommodate words from languages with non-Latin scripts. However, inserting language with a different script or alphabet is risky as it can prove a disruptive experience. An English speaker can readily research a word in a language with a Latin-based alphabet. It’s more difficult to do so for a word with a different

character set. Languages that are written from right to left (Arabic and Hebrew, for instance) will require a layout that can accommodate bidirectional text.

However, judiciously used, words from such languages can be useful, as in Lee Gurga's haiku:⁵

Θάλαττα! θάλαττα!
we patter around the deck
in fair trade sandals

("The sea! The sea!" after Xenophon)

slow motion rollers
caress the glacial shore
ἰκτῆ ἠ εὐρυτῆ

("icy and eager," from Beowulf)

Gurga borrows phrases from classical work in Ancient Greek and Old English⁶ to throw relief upon our relationship with the sea. The first is a famous quote from *Anabasis*, when a re-treating Greek army arrives to safety at the shore of the Black Sea. From *Beowulf*, the second quote is part of a description of the funeral of the king, Shield Sheafson. In both poems, the immortality of the sea is contrasted with mortal humanity. In the first poem, the tone is humorous: the smallness of people and their concerns is represented by "patter" and "fair trade sandals." In the second, the tone is sober. The body of the deceased king is sent off in a ship to drift on the sea. The vessel that holds the king's body is characterized as "icy" (which indicates the season) and "eager." Despite the fact that the boat is laden with treasure and gear, the Beowulf narrator reflects that no one knows "who salvaged that load."⁷ In each case, the Greek or Old English reinforces the distinction between us and the unknowable oceans. The non-Latin scripts make the words seem remote and impenetrable. The antiquity of the two languages also underscores the passing of time.

Although not using a Latin-based script, Japanese represents a special case for haiku poets.⁸

after the ginko—
still there, all the things
I never noticed⁹

Most haiku poets know the meaning of the term *ginkō* (a haiku walk), and over time the word probably sheds some of its “foreign-ness” to our specialized community. But there is no direct counterpart in English. A word like “stroll” might be a usable ingredient, but it would not match the precise meaning that Carlos Colón intends. In contrast to a recreational stroll or walk, the *ginkō* is a practice with an explicit aim: to encourage the process of “noticing” and writing.

Over time many Japanese terms have migrated into English and become part of the language. They cover many aspects of life, including religion, the arts, cuisine, and sports.

vintage kimono
my seams unraveling
this perfect life¹⁰

The use of “kimono” in this poem by Renée Owen raises a question: what defines a word as English? Where is the border between English and non-English words? As a word becomes prevalent in English usage, at what point does it become an English word? A formal solution would be to declare that a word has to be present in an authoritative resource (say, the *Oxford English Dictionary*) for it to be accepted as English. But, of course, some words used in the United States are not used in the United Kingdom, not to mention other Anglophone countries.

For a writer, a strict ruling on a word may not be useful. A “borderline” word (one that retains an association with the original language but is becoming common in English) may be used effectively as a foreign word even if it’s also recognized as an English one.

slow down
mañana still
under construction¹¹

“Mañana” is an example of a word that has made its way into English but is still closely associated with Spanish. The word’s sounds are distinctly Spanish (for instance, the “eñe”) and have not been Anglicized. This quality aids the word’s centrality in the poem by Lauren Camp. In this poem, “mañana” acts like a Spanish, not an English, word.

This poem also shows one of the pitfalls of resorting to a foreign word. If “mañana” is replaced with “tomorrow,” the tone and meaning change little. The word “mañana” is typically used in informal slang and speech; it often implies slowing down. But this is not the overall tone of this haiku, and “tomorrow” seems as fitting a choice. In this case, the non-English word does not add much more value.

There can be significant benefits to using foreign words. A haiku is rooted in a specific time and place—and a foreign term or *kigo* can authentically reflect this. Similarly, a foreign language term may be better suited to a haiku or senryu with a cultural theme. Also, a non-English word may convey a sentiment or feeling that is distinct from its English counterpart. Finally, foreign vocabulary can add another layer of experience onto a haiku, and encourage readers to learn more beyond the poem.

Despite all of these benefits, the use of foreign terms also presents challenges. Non-English terms can be poor surrogates for English ones that are more concrete. Misused, the practice may be seen as a cliché or a device to salvage an otherwise unsuccessful poem. It’s easy for foreign words to seem out of place and to be disruptive and confusing—distracting the reader from the whole poem.

As global travel and cross-border migrations continue to grow, and people of diverse cultures interact with greater

frequency, it seems likely that the prevalence of multilingual vocabulary in haiku will only increase. Like any formal practice, the use of multilingual vocabulary offers opportunities and pitfalls to the poet. An awareness of these will help poets produce original and meaningful work.

Notes

1. Dietmar Tauchner, from “Four Rome Haiku,” in *Modern Haiku* 41.1 (winter-spring 2010), 86.
2. Patricia Machmiller, in *Mariposa* 10 (Spring/Summer 2004), 7.
3. Ibid. Machmiller defines “retablo” as “Mexican folk art. A small religious painting on tin, originally used to decorate home altars.”
4. Bill Kenney, in *Modern Haiku* 42.3 (autumn 2011), 12.
5. Lee Gurga, in *Modern Haiku* 44.2 (summer 2013), 33.
6. Although a precursor to Modern English, Old English is sufficiently different so as to be considered a foreign language.
7. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Seamus Heaney, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 5. In the Heaney version, “icy and eager” is translated as “ice-clad, outbound” (5). I used “icy and eager” because of Gurga’s reference.
8. A Latin-based script for Japanese does exist (*rōmaji*), which can make the language more accessible to Western readers. However, *rōmaji* is mainly used for non-Japanese speakers and learners.
9. Carlos Colón, in *Frogpond* 34:1 (Winter 2011), 30.
10. Renée Owen, in *Frogpond* 34:1 (Winter 2011), 30.
11. Lauren Camp, in Matthew Chase-Daniel & Jerry Wellman, “Axle Contemporary’s Haiku Roadsign Project” [photo-essay], *Frogpond* 35:1 (Winter 2012), 139.



David Grayson’s haiku and essays have been published widely in haiku journals. He was featured in A New Resonance 6: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku.