In Immigrating From Japan, I Lost Language, Home, and Pokémon | Nina Li Coomes

Aug. 28th, 2019

This is Mistranslate, a column by Nina Li Coomes about language, self-expression, and what it means to exist between cultures.

There are things we lose in childhood. One of these lost objects for me is my bright green Pokémon book, the thought of which conjures its perfect square weight in the palm of my hand. I don't remember its title, or who made it, or how I even came by it, but I remember clearly the joy it inspired in me, carbonated liberally by curiosity.

The premise was that of the Pokédex. On one side of the page was a black and white rendition of a Pokémon, on the other was its name and according statistics. The pages were cheap and newsprint-like, as if something made with rough materials suitable for expeditions and journeys, furthering my attached feelings of expanse and adventure. Its verdant cover wasn't a deep hunter or twisted neon, but the kind of sunny, uncomplicated green you'd expect of a primary color chart.

The Pokémon book was a book, to be sure. I remember lolling sideways across a Japanese hotel bed on a vacation to Okinawa, holding it up and flicking through the pages, lingering on Kyukon and Fushigitane, while my parents ran around trying to kill the cockroaches that had appeared beneath the bed. Mostly, I treated the Pokémon book like a talisman. It was an object I held dear and close. I

took it everywhere. It made me feel knowledgeable and brave, at once safe and adventuresome.

Like so many people my age, I grew up during the first generation of Pokémon lovers. I like to think that I got into Pokémon on the ground floor, having grown up in Japan just as the manga was turned into a hit anime. Come Wednesday nights, I'd scramble through dinner and bath time and anxiously wait for seven o'clock, sitting on the tatami floor, hair still damp down my small back.

I even remember the original "Pokémon Incident," when a televised sequence of Pikachu's electric attacks caused over 700 viewers to go into seizures. We all discussed it in serious hushed tones at kindergarten the next day. Starting the next week, a periodic subtitle scrolled across the bottom of the screen, warning us to sit far away. My mother made sure my back touched the sliding door against the far wall while watching Pokémon.

On weeknights, when visiting my grandparents with my cousins, I'd insist that we play our game of 'Pokémon battle,' where we were not Pokémon trainers but the Pokémon themselves. (Usually, I chose Raichu or Boosutaa, and always found a way to explain why I would win the battle, no matter how weak or strong in actuality my Pokémon of choice was.) I looked forward to the summertime when my aunt would take us to the seedy theater near our kindergarten to watch the latest Pokémon movie, followed by a trip to Mr. Donut.

Pokémon was a milieu in which I felt comfortable, could play and express myself. It was a taxonomy that, much like my little green book, offered up secure, comforting ground for my imagination and flights of fancy.

*

There are things we lose in childhood. When I moved to the United States at the age of seven, one of the things I lost unexpectedly were my words.

My father is an American, and so we spoke some semblance of simple English largely mixed with Japanese at home. When I entered the public school system of rural Illinois, I quickly learned that my verbal abilities were nowhere near my peers'. In essence, I went from being completely linguistically comfortable—reading, writing, and speaking at grade level—to being functionally illiterate. I could say that I was hungry, that I wanted to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't read or write.

To further confound the expectations of my teachers, I didn't have the accent they assumed an Asian speaker of English would have—my pronunciation was the same flat hybrid Midwestern Kentucky drawl my father and his family spoke. I only had this canyon in my knowledge, a problem they solved by putting me into an ad-hoc ESL class where I met with another teacher while the other children did their age-appropriate learning. It was just me and the kindly woman, who I remember only as a blurry memory of grandmotherly floral blouses and a long ropey braid.

I hated these hours. They made me feel small and embarrassed, aggrieved like I'd had a whole trove of perfectly usable words taken away from me. Not only was I embarrassed by not being able to read or write, but the hour of ESL further isolated me from my white class, who were seemingly all reeling at the existence of their lone Asian mixed-race classmate ("Where's Japan? It's part of China right?"). I felt lonely and thick-tongued, a formerly chatty and book-loving child turned silent and sullen, collateral damage to the immigration I perceived as an unjust violence done unto me.

```
I'd had a whole trove of perfectly usable words taken away fro
```

One thing, however, gave me hope. Pokémon entered the US market in the late '90s, meaning it had just reached its crest of popularity among my American peers (as well as its crest of doubt among their parents, who debated at the local

post-church coffee hour whether Pokémon, like *Harry Potter*, was from the Devil or not). The sight of my classmate's Pokémon-emblazoned lunch boxes, a glimpse of Pokémon videos in the window at Blockbuster, all of these filled me with a sense of optimism.

Maybe, I thought, even if I couldn't quite find the right words, I could play Pokémon with my peers and bridge the cavernous gap of being an immigrant in an all-white classroom. I would show them my Japanese trading cards, they would show me their English ones, and we would laugh and feel that same mix of curiosity and adventure together. I believed that this might be it, that Pokémon would be the diplomatic maneuver needed to secure my place among my peers.

So, one day, I edged closer to a boy at recess who was showing off his binder full of Pokémon cards, each one nestled in its shiny plastic sleeve. This was my moment, I was sure of it. I would sidle up casually and cooly drop some compliment about a particularly beautiful or rare Pokémon.

As I drew closer, I realized I couldn't understand what they were talking about. It wasn't the English. I could understand the simple pitter-patter of children jealously admiring another child's collection of coveted objects.

It was the Pokémon I couldn't understand. As I squinted at the boy's Pokémon cards, I realized with dawning horror that this too was something that had been taken away from me. With the exception of the most basic Pikachu, it seemed all the Pokémon had been given different, alien English names. Zenigame was Squirtle. Lizardon was Charizard. Purin was somehow, inexplicably, named Jigglypuff. (Jigglypuff?!)

I scurried away, averting my eyes from the strange imposter Pokémon. Shame flared behind my eyes, loneliness and anguish muddling in my chest. How silly I had been to think that Pokémon could save me. In the end, I was still an isolated, wordless outsider.

*

There are things we lose in translation. I like to think I know this better than most. As an adult, I've made it my business to write about translation, as well as work as a freelance translator and localizer. Whether on a conference call or reading a novel, certain cultural nuances, inside jokes, and double meanings fall away. This is just the nature of language. It evolves and sheds its skin in the presence of a different tongue.

Some words don't survive the transition. I realize now that logically speaking, many of the Japanese names for Pokémon wouldn't have made sense in English. Some Japanese names are just direct English romanizations, like Charmeleon being Lizardo, which, written in English would just be plain old Lizard. Others are double meanings or jokes in Japanese that wouldn't translate into English: Bulbasaur is Fushigitane, which also means Mysterious Seed; Cubone and Marowak are Karakara and Garagara, the onomatopoeic sounds a dry bone would make if rattling. From an objective, linguistic point of view, it makes complete sense that Pokémon should have different names in different languages.

But after that day on the playground, I distanced myself from Pokémon. Somehow, the experience of the English Pokémon names rendered this beloved cultural object unrecognizable. I felt betrayed. In order to shield myself from that horrible memory, I began to say that I hated Pokémon. When my classmates eventually realized that Pokémon were Japanese and I was also Japanese, I scowled and outright lied, telling them no one in Japan liked Pokémon.

```
The experience of the English Pokémon names rendered this belo
```

When my family visited Japan for summer breaks, I avoided each newly released Pokémon movie, no matter the nostalgia of sitting through the earlier films with my cousins. In high school, I scoffed at classmates who dressed as Team Rocket

for Halloween. The thing that had once brought me such feelings of expansive happiness now only brought memories of loneliness and difficulty.

I'd tell friends and boyfriends my Coming-To-America-With-Pokémon story with an arch, sarcastic spin. I tried to turn a small tragedy into a comedy. When I told my then-boyfriend, now-husband this story, I turned to him expecting a laugh or at least a chuckle. I was surprised to see his eyes were puddled and teary.

"That's such a sad story," he said.

I looked at him, bewildered by his empathy. I said, "Yeah, I guess it is."

*

And then, there are things we find again.

For a long time, I expected that my story of Pokémon would end with that day on the playground. Pokémon would continue to be emblematic of the bewildering loss of immigration, a sort of synecdoche for all the unexpected pitfalls of transitioning between languages and cultures. I would continue to feign detached disinterest at the sight of friends playing newly released Pokémon games, while internally grimacing at the still-tender memory it brought up.

Gladly, I was wrong. Healing comes in many strange forms. For me, it came in the form of a truly ridiculous movie: *Detective Pikachu*.

Detective Pikachu, on the outset, is a silly-looking film. Somehow, Pikachu is a detective voiced by Ryan Reynolds, who helps to solve a missing persons case with a kid played by Justice Smith. The combination of concepts is unlikely, even surreal in a Dali sort of way, but it was that very surrealness that drew me to the story.

I could see this movie while remaining a sarcastic, ridiculing posture because it was so weird, helped especially by the fact that my friends and I had made an ad-hoc Bad Movie Club, where we would purposefully watch terrible movies, crowing with disbelieving laughter. Surely this film would be so bad that I could remain detached from my childhood feelings of hurt.

So, my friends and I smuggled a bag of Trader Joe's Chili Lime Roll Ups into a Boston movie theater and settled in for what was sure to be a truly terrible, extremely odd film without any sort of emotional attachment.

I did not at all expect to be completely suffused with giddy, effervescent euphoria, but that's what *Detective Pikachu* did. In *Detective Pikachu*, I saw Pokémon inhabit space as if they were real. During the first establishing shots of Rhyme City, I watched agog at the many Pokémon that filled the screen. Their vibrant furs ruffling in movie wind; they slithered, fluttered, and meandered down streets. They walked, flew, and swam alongside humans, cawing, chirping, and roaring. Seeing this somehow bypassed the memories of sadness and pain I associated with the franchise, and accessed instead that old, unlikely joy.

To this day, I'm not sure how it did that—perhaps it was the more anthropological focus on the Pokémon, the painstakingly detailed animation, or the fact that the credits incorporated both the English and Japanese names of the Pokémon.

Maybe it was just that enough time had passed such that there was distance from the pain. Or maybe *Detective Pikachu* is a magical film perfect for all ages. But when the light came up in the darkened theater, I felt sparkling and bright. I regained that heart-pounding six-year-old feeling, brave and adventuresome.
