Take your taimingu when translating loan words

By DANIEL MORALES

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The English translation of the manga "Death Note" by Tsugumi Ōba has sold millions of copies around the world — with barely a mention anywhere of the glaring translation error in the title and throughout the work: "Death Note" should in fact be "Death Notebook."

While the Japanese word nito (ないtodo) derives from the English word "note," in common use it always means "notebook." Fortunately, "Death Note" makes a catchy title and can be read at a stretch as the "notes" in the "Death Notebook." But this mistake offers a valuable lesson for students of Japanese and translators: Loan words live a life separate from the words that gave birth to them.

Nito is not unique in this sense. Japan has a long history of commandeering words from other languages and making them its own. Kobo Daishi, one of Japan’s first exchange students, allegedly brought back thousands of kanji from China in the eighth century. Words from Portuguese and Holland arrived through Nagasaki roughly 1,000 years later. More recently, Japanese has borrowed from English and other languages, and hence there are now legions of words that require thought before you can convert them back into their source language.

Taimingu (タイミング, timing) is a good example. While clearly an English word in origin, it exemplifies the way words quickly work their way into native Japanese patterns. Naisu taimingu (ナイスタイミング) is used fairly often (it has 130,000-plus search results on Google) and can be rendered back into English with much difficulty. Taimingu yoku (タイミングよく), however, is more natural (560,000-plus search results on Google). Here, taimingu has been incorporated into a natural Japanese phrase — a noun followed by the adverb yoku, which, when used to modify a verb, implies that an action is done "with a generous amount of" the noun. Examples include "kiiyoku (勢いよく), "with a generous amount of force"); nakayoku (仲良く, "... of friendliness"); kokochiyoku (心地よく, "... of comfort"); and tegiwayoku (手際よく, "... of skill").

Taimingu yoku can be found in many video games — often modifying phrases like botan wo osu (press the button[]). Developers use it when the player must input a series of well-timed button presses to accomplish a certain action.

It can be tempting in this case to try to preserve taimingu in translation by using the English word "timing," but "Press the button good-timing-ly" is clearly wrong. "Press the button with good timing" is grammatically sound but still awkward, and "Press the button with a generous amount of timing" is very strange. "Press the button at the right time" and "Press the buttons in the proper rhythm/order" are decent candidates, depending on the specific content of the game in question.

Realizing the English word of origin can’t be adjusted to fit the Japanese properties the word has taken on is not easy for rookie translators. They hem and haw, striving to be true to the source text; they may translate the word back to "timing" without even thinking. Japanese game developers, too, often struggle to cast aside the crutch that katakana words provide; if they hear the word "taimingu" in a game, they may translate it without thinking and use it when the player must input a series of well-timed button presses to accomplish a certain action.

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