

# In Japan, the most important rule for language translation is often broken

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Farm facts?: A sign on the Seto Inland Sea island of Shiraishi that's meant to inform visitors also amuses them. | AMY CHAVEZ

I've had many a tourist tell me I could get rich by proofreading the poor English on signs, menus and pamphlets in Japan. Their reference to such wealth does not mean to highlight the actual compensation involved for professional translation but rather the immense volume of work available for such a person.

These well-meaning travelers who have been assaulted by so much translation gone awry are presuming Japan is aware of the problem. And that they care.

In fact, sometimes Japan seems to prefer to promote bad English. After being commissioned to write an article in English on the Seto Inland Sea for a government-subsidized tourism website, the Japanese editor added

various erroneous Japanese-English subheadings such as “Let’s rent bicycle!” The very end of the article lists “Genaral Information.” This alternative spelling runs a close second to that by another public sector entity near my house where a sign claims they offer “infarmation.”

When we think of poor English translations, we often think of funny English or relatively harmless typos such as those above. Such flaws originate because a foreign language is being translated by someone who doesn’t speak that language. But it’s actually far more complicated than that.

While most people think the only qualification one needs to translate is a knowledge of the foreign language (also called the second or target language), there are two qualifications even more important than language ability.

The other day, a Japanese friend asked me, “Can you check this English translation for any mistakes?” She was in charge of an art exhibit featuring flyers for the event written in Japanese with English translations inserted where appropriate. She was hoping I would correct “any mistakes” by the following day, when she would be taking the circulars to the printer for a second printing. With the 10-day exhibit already into its first day, she had prepared a preliminary 100 copies of said flyer to give out to the initial attendees.

That evening as I opened the file on my computer to look it over, an exasperated groan emanated from my office, the same painful sound native English speakers all over Japan emit after opening such “already translated” documents. This was no simple matter of correcting a few errors; it would require a complete rewrite.

In an attempt to honor the original translation, and to avoid any losing of face by the original Japanese translator, I attempted to rework their translated text. But the more I found myself having to consult the original

Japanese version for meaning, the more I realized how difficult this task was going to be. So I consulted my Japanese friend to make sure it was OK to disregard the original translation and start at the beginning with the Japanese text. She agreed, saying, “Sure, but remember I need it by tomorrow!”

Next, I had to visit the art exhibit to really understand what they were trying to relate in their eight numbered points about the artworks. Although there is a pervasive idea in Japan that you shouldn’t have to explain art, I nonetheless felt it would be prudent to at least give English speakers an idea of what they were being asked to come and look at, since none of the artists was famous enough in his or her own right to attract a following.

I was able to catch the last hour of the exhibit that evening, and in the morning, weaving the physical with the metaphysical aspects of the artworks, I came up with a translation I felt was true enough to the original Japanese, but still offered hints of intrigue for foreigners whose curiosity I was hoping to pique.

I’m sure a professional translator would have done a better job than I. And I surely would have encouraged my friend to find a more appropriate person, but she did not have a budget for that. My intention was only to help her out as a friend, knowing this was strictly volunteer.

Unfortunately, this is the situation many NPOs and government-subsidized agencies find themselves in. Both public- and private-sector projects often treat translation as something minor and not worthy of investment. But translation should be considered another component of PR, and a good translation (like a good tweet or a good Instagram photo) will generate more interest than a word-for-word translation — or worse, an incomprehensible one.

The first rule of translation is to always translate into your native tongue.

For example, just because I speak Japanese as a second language does not mean I can translate into Japanese successfully. I should only translate Japanese into my mother language, which is English.

Thus, native Japanese speakers should translate from English (their second language) into Japanese (their first), not the other way around. The only exception is bilinguals — those who have two mother tongues, having grown up speaking both Japanese and English with native proficiency.

The second factor to look at is who is doing the translation. Why has that person been chosen to translate? Is it only because they're a native speaker? Or because they're convenient? A friend? Because they'll work for free? These are the wrong reasons to choose a person to translate.

Instead, you should first ask: Can the person write well in their native language? Do they know the difference between spoken and written English? Colloquial and formal? Are they familiar with the rules of grammar? If someone can't write clear, concise, grammatically correct sentences in their native language, how will they translate another language into clear, concise, grammatically correct sentences? You want a person who not only knows the language, but who is a decent — preferably accomplished — writer in that language as well.

Only after you've secured the first two requirements should you consider the proficiency of the translator in the foreign language. This is not discounting second-language proficiency. It just means that this should be the third consideration, not the first. That's quite a few qualifications to go through before arriving at the seemingly simple task you are hoping to accomplish — a translation.

As Japan continues to court more and more foreign tourists, the nation must learn to respect foreign languages as much as its own. Investing in proper translations of signs, menus, brochures and pamphlets into English (or any other language) is paramount.

Translation is not just rendering information from one language into another, but presenting that information in an attractive enough format to convince people to read and act upon it. Otherwise, why even translate?

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