

Getting it right in Japanese

Shocked by a high-profile translation fiasco in Japan, Yuno Dinnie spearheaded the creation of a Japanese-language version of Chris Durban's popular booklet



Yuno Dinnie MITI has been translating between English and Japanese since 1990. She has a bilingual blog, <http://blog.way2japan.com>, and tweets (mostly in Japanese) as @yunod.

One April day last year, a Japanese tweet that caught my eye: 'Destination Tohoku campaign website shut down after reports of numerous translation errors'.

The linked news article explained that the multilingual website to promote Japan's northeastern region, launched a month earlier, provided its English, Korean and Chinese content through an automated translation engine, but no checks had been carried out on the quality of its output before it went live. The result was an embarrassing mess – the cherry blossom festival at the Akita Senshu Park became 'Senshu park cherry tree Festival which we got tired of' and the memorial day dedicated to poet Takuboku was renamed 'Woodpecker mourning'. Even the campaign slogan, which roughly translates to 'joining the hearts of people together', was rendered 'We conclude heart'.

It's not that translation blunders are rare in Japan; you can't spend a day in the country without coming across at least a few examples of what has come to be known as Japangrish or Engrish – clueless and often hilarious attempts, human or machine-generated, at English signage and copywriting. But this was different. Destination Tohoku was a major promotional campaign by the Japan Tourism Agency to help boost the economy of the Tohoku region devastated by the triple disaster – massive earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown – of March 2011. The JTA was given hundreds of millions of yen to pour into this important piece of the government's recovery aid package. Yet we were told that the campaign's web portal used machine translation to provide information intended to attract overseas visitors. Another news source reported that the company that supplied the translation engine did so for free 'as a gesture of goodwill to support Tohoku, even though the system normally costs several million yen'.

The Twittersphere was soon buzzing with voices of

incensed translators. Tohoku was a subject close to the hearts of many translators, who volunteered their time in the months following the disaster to help the region, translating lifeline information, fund-raising and doing relief work. Yet here we have a government agency skimping on the cost of translation. Didn't they know that machine translation was not exactly ideal for producing sophisticated foreign-language promotional text? And wasn't anyone involved even slightly worried about the absence of pre-launch quality checks? It seemed that what we thought was obvious was, in fact, not. The translation industry needed to do some serious client education.

In the Twitter conversations, I mentioned Chris Durban's *Translation: Getting It Right*, a client education booklet first published by ITI in 2002. The booklet has since been translated into several languages, with over 100,000 printed copies distributed. It seemed to me that this was just what we needed, and many agreed – so the project to produce a Japanese version was born.

I prepared the first draft and got in touch with Chris, who gave me her blessing and valuable pointers on how to proceed with the project. I recruited a number of volunteers to help polish my translation and do the layout, and the team got to work. With Chris's approval, we replaced a few of the anecdotes from the English version and rejigged some of the text to make sure the content was relevant to the Japanese translation market.

The finished result

In order to get the maximum publicity, it was vital that we had the support of translation organisations based in Japan. When Ben Jones FITI proposed a Japanese version of the document back in 2007, it was met with a distinctly lukewarm reception, with some even saying that it wouldn't work because Japan was 'different'. With this memory I approached two FIT-affiliated organisations in Japan with some trepidation. It turned out that things had changed a lot – perhaps the Destination Tohoku fiasco (which I included as a case study in the Japanese version) was a wake-up call. The boards of the Japan Association of Translators and Japan Translation Federation both voted to lend their names to the project alongside ITI, the ATA and SFT.

Our project target was to make printed copies of the booklet available at the biggest industry event in Japan, JFT's Translation Festival in November. It attracts hundreds of participants, not only translators but also translation companies and – importantly – potential clients. The work to produce the final text and a print-ready file took longer than I first hoped, but in the end we managed to send 1,000 copies of the booklet, hot off the press, to the event in Tokyo. With one of our volunteers handing them out to participants attending the client-focused sessions, most were gone at the end of the day – mission accomplished. 



A PDF of the Japanese version of *Translation: Getting It Right* can be downloaded from the ITI website (under About the Industry – Advice for buyers). Printed copies are also available upon request.