What’s wrong with Japanese to English translation?

A theory of Japlish in five questions
Although now rivalled in incomprehensibility by automatic translation engines, Japanese to English translation has long been infamous for its awkward and unintentionally hilarious “Japlish”.
As a Japanese to English translator, I have to ask...

How DID THIS HAPPEN?
ASKING THE QUESTIONS

The **who**, **how**, **where**, **when** and **why** of Japanese to English translation
1. Who translates Japanese to English?
In the USA and western Europe, most translators work into their native language. For example, a native English speaker only translates from other languages into English.

In other countries, including Japan, it is common to translate out of your native language into your second language.

When asked at a conference in 2015, the head of the life sciences and medical division of a large Japanese translation company answered that all their translation into English is done by native Japanese speakers.
Who translates Japanese to English?

The weakening yen has also made it more expensive for Japanese companies to work with translators in other countries, which limits their pool of native English speakers.

Does it matter?

Unless genuinely bilingual, people normally have greater power of expression in their native language. (Whether they’re a good writer in their native language is another question.)

Someone writing in their second language is prone to using the sentence structure of their native language and making mistakes where the grammars of the two languages differ, and may be unable to communicate nuance or construct complex sentences.
2. How is Japanese translated to English?
How is Japanese translated to English?

The translation industry exists along a continuum. At one end, specialists supported by an abundance of resources painstakingly transfer meaning between languages, cultures and contexts. At the other, a kind of mass production is operated by technology startups or large multinational corporations.

If you picture the industry as a pyramid of resources and specialisation, the large base segment is operating at low prices and focused on high volumes. There is little specialisation, as that would limit volume.

Translation at this level is a commodity.

Does it matter?
Commodities, generic products bought at high volumes for low prices, are a valid concept when manufacturing physical goods. But this does not apply to a skilled service such as translation where every word needs the same level of investment as the first.

There are also longer term effects: a translator in this segment spends more time working and has fewer resources (time or money) to improve their skills. They spend more time at the coalface and have fewer opportunities to keep learning, maintain their skills or specialise.

But wait, there’s more.
3. When is Japanese translated to English?
Translation as a commodity is subject to time pressure. Demand for fast turnaround can force translators to work at a speed that is unsustainable both for themselves and for the quality of their work.

Time is essential to producing a translation that is fit for purpose: time for familiarisation with the writer, their values, their subject and business, time to ask questions about the audience, the source text and style, time to edit and polish, discover and solve problems.

In the commodity segment, there is no time or money for anything except churning out words.

**Does it matter?**
Sacrificing time or cost affects the other two elements.

Sacrificing time and cost reduces the chances of achieving quality.
4. Where is Japanese translated to English?
Commodity translation happens at the end of a long chain, distant from the original client, their knowledge and expectations.

Translation companies manage the process to a greater or lesser extent – anything from enabling content to be thrown over the wall in the form of uploading documents to translation platforms, through to dedicated and knowledgeable project managers who bring the ends of chain closer without allowing them to touch.

Without access to the client, translation is effectively done blind: without enough background knowledge, reference material or answers to questions. The problem is compounded when the text is for complex or interactive products such as software.

Does it matter?
Knowledge of a language doesn’t translate into knowledge of a subject area. Knowing two languages doesn’t give a translator an understanding of law, or medicine, or engineering.

Many translators specialise in a small number of areas, building up the background knowledge needed for a translation that reads as if written by a native language writer who knows the subject, and able to interpret or fill in gaps in the source text. (When something comes along that isn’t in their area, they pass it to a network of colleagues who are experts in other fields.)

But in the commodity segment with its lack of specialisation, isolation from the client and lack of reference material increases the risk of misinterpretation, misunderstanding and error.
5. Why is Japanese translated to English?
“Really necessary care for elderly to pursue deep something, you embody.”

Screenshot from a hospital management company site, 2015.
Retranslated: “We relentlessly pursue the meaning of essential care for the elderly and make it a reality.”

WHY?

How does this come to be on a corporate site? What are they hoping to achieve?
Is Japlish there for a reason?

“The purpose of a system is what it does.”
(Stafford Beer, cyberneticist)

Some Japanese to English translation doesn’t seem to be for the benefit of the English-speaking reader. So what is it for?

It looks like English, but in a form that native Japanese speakers can pattern match and “understand”.

Native English speakers translating from Japanese are often frustrated by their clients inserting Japlish into English text: making the translation more literal, replicating the grammatical structure of the original text, introducing archaic or out of context terms that appear as the first definition of a word in a dictionary.

What is happening here?
What if the translation is there to make the company look international to itself and other Japanese companies, but in a form that they can understand?
Back to the spectrum

This is a theory for how some of the worst Japlish comes about, but these factors also apply to a spectrum of translation quality from the utterly incomprehensible, through the intelligible but awkward, to well-written English with occasional startling errors.

The who, how, when, where and why of translation can make it a failure, or a success.

If you can find the right answer to these questions, you’ll get the right results for your translation.
Who: The translator
Know who is translating. If your translation needs to be nuanced and free from error, choose a specialist who is a native speaker or true bilingual.

How: Conditions
Good translation takes time and resources—money and effort. The more you put into creating positive conditions, the better the results.

When: Scheduling
Build enough time into the process to go through all the steps needed to get the result you want: research, familiarisation, review, checking, testing.

Where: In context
Work with your translator to ensure they have the contact and context essential to making the translation fit for purpose.

Why: For your audience
Know who is reading and why. The readership and purpose of a text may change between the original and the translation.
Japlish-free Japanese to English Translation

Talk

Talk through your localisation requirements and identify potential issues and solutions

Plan

Get expert advice to optimise your processes and create your localisation plan

Relax

Enjoy peace of mind with a sound workflow that reliably produces the translations you need

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