

COUNTERPOINT

Egg-on-face bloopers can make a yolk or worse of any translation

By ROGER PULVERS

Many readers will be familiar with the infamous guarantee said to have been spotted on the menu of a Hong Kong restaurant: "All the water used in our soups has been personally passed by the chef." Some may also have heard of that creepy assurance printed in the catalog for an art exhibition during the Soviet era in Russia: "The artworks in this exhibition are by artists executed during the past 20 years."

It is so easy to snigger superciliously at these mistranslations — and many Western bookshops have shelves full of tomes doing just that — yet anyone who has interpreted speech or translated texts from one language into another knows that, sooner or later, egg on the face is a hazard just waiting to happen.

Consider the poor Japanese diplomat who was giving an important speech at an international gathering. At the end he wanted to say that he hoped to meet everyone again soon, but made the ghastly mistake of translating literally a Japanese phrase that means this, namely, "*narubeku hayaku minasan to ome ni kakaritai.*" Literally, *ome ni kakaru* means "to hang before the eyes." So our unfortunate diplomat ended his speech — and, perhaps, his career — with the English sign-off: "I want to see all of you hanging before my eyes as soon as possible!"

That may be enough rope for an entire article, but it hardly stops there.

An Australian friend of mine, ever eager to try out his

meager Japanese on anybody, dropped a classic clanger. I call his Japanese "meager," but if his Japanese vocabulary were made of chocolate, it wouldn't even fill a Smartie.

Despite this, my friend refused to speak English with any Japanese he met, even a professor at a major university whose doctoral thesis at Oxford had been on "The Weighty Works of Ezra Pound."

To make a long story as short as humanely possible in the interests of my friend's embarrassment, the professor showed him a photo of his wife, whereupon my friend, pointing to it, exclaimed loudly, on a crowded train, "*Anata no okusan wa kirai desu ne!*" ("I really loathe your wife!")

Readers familiar with the Australian accent in English will know that *kirei* (lovely, smashing, beautiful) can come out sounding like *kirai* (hateful, loathsome, despicable) when the final diphthong gets stuck in the thick lower depths of the Aussie glottis.

And spare a little sympathy for the young American Rotary exchange student who had spent six months in a small town in Okayama Prefecture and was called upon, at the end of her stay, to give a speech before members of the local Rotary Club and their wives.

She was doing quite well, stringing one cliché onto another (the best strategy for faking a speech), until she made a forceful comment on the role of women in Japan compared with that in her own country.

"The women in my country are free," she said in Japanese, "and many have jobs, too. But almost all of the women in this, my host city, are prostitutes."

This biting sociological observation did not, you can imagine, go down very well with the worthies in attendance — or their wives. The young American guest in this small Okayama town had intended to label the women in her host city as *shufu* (housewives); but had actually called them *shofu* (harlots, prostitutes, call girls). As a Japanese physician I know once said in English (inadvertently

exchanging a "v" for a "b"), "If you have trouble with your vowels, it is hard to act regular."

Well, there is hope yet for those of you out there who dare to interpret and translate, regularly or not. Here are a few hints on how to minimize your shame.

When interpreting, always make sure that you can see the face of the speaker. If you cannot, you run a greater risk of misunderstanding their words. My old friend, the renowned simultaneous interpreter Masumi Matsumura, recounted to me an incident that occurred when he was interpreting in Washington for a Japanese prime minister. Asked what kind of defense policy he envisaged for Japan, the prime minister remarked that Japan was like a porcupine. In other words, the country would not attack, but would be well armed, as it were, if set upon by others.

Now, the Japanese word for porcupine is *harinezumi*, or, literally, "needle mouse." Unfortunately, the prime minister had turned his head to one side when saying this, and Matsumura heard only the second half of the word, being *nezumi* (mouse). He was about to translate this with "Our defense policy is that of a mouse," when that all-important bell of common sense chimed in his head and he asked the prime minister for clarification.

This case, of being saved by the bell, is exemplary. Another hint, then, is to let common sense be your guide. If something that you have interpreted from a speech or translated from a text does not sound right, check it or look it up before you leap into translation.

"Even the great sage Kukai makes a slip of the brush," as the Japanese proverb goes; and seasoned translators of literature are equally not immune to error.

Dmitry Kovalenin, the excellent Russian translator of the works of Haruki Murakami, once tripped over the translation of *kumozaru*, meaning the spider monkey that is native of Central and South America. Kovalenin assumed, it seems, that Murakami was referring to a mythical animal, so he used a bizarre

made-up equivalent of "spider" and "monkey" in Russian. Another Japanese proverb tells us that "even monkeys fall from trees"; and Kovalenin was man enough to bring this particular fall to light himself by acknowledging it publicly.

Well, dear reader, but for the grace of God go I as well. During my first year in Japan, some 40 years ago, I took a trip around Kyushu. I stopped off at an inn in Usuki and asked the owner the cost of a room.

"It's ¥1,200," she said, adding "*benkyo shimasu*."

My Japanese then was pretty minimal, but I knew that *benkyo shimasu* means "I will study." So I figured that this lady was offering me the room at this price so long as I taught her some English in the bargain.

"*Benkyo shite kudasai!* (Well then, study!)," I blurted out; and much to my surprise and delight, she lowered the price to ¥1,000, which at the time was less than \$3.

When, later that evening, I started to speak English to her, she waved her hand in front of her face and told me that she didn't understand a blooming word of the language. It was only then that I checked my dictionary and discovered that *benkyo suru* can also mean "to offer a discount."

The golden rule of translating is: If you think you're wrong, you probably are. Armed with that, a good dictionary and some common sense, you'll probably make a regular translator.

But as my physician friend would say, "Just keep your vowels moving and the consonants will take care of themselves."

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