

(1) Junichi Furuyama, director & executive editor of the International Division of Asahi Shimbun
(2) Raghu Das, CEO of IDTechEx

Internet Innovations & “Englishization” May Save Us from Being Lost in Translation

By Japan SPOTLIGHT Editorial Section



Photo: photolibary

Shinjuku – A Multiethnic Spot “Lost in Translation”

Sophia Coppola’s 2003 film *Lost in Translation* depicted how difficult it can be for people to understand each other, not only Japanese and non-Japanese, but also men and women, and the young and the old. The major scenes of the film were shot in the most multiethnic spot of Tokyo – the downtown area of Shinjuku. The Hyatt Regency Tokyo hotel in Shinjuku, one of the most Americanized hotels and also the most popular with young people, where the main characters of the film met, is symbolic of the labyrinthine nature of a big city where people can easily lose their ability to communicate. In such a place, people feel isolated from each other and verbal communication is mostly kept distant from the depths of the human heart. The film also showed that translation between English and Japanese is truly a challenge. You have to think in English if you want to make yourself understood by native English-speaking people, and likewise with Japanese. Such difficulties in translating a foreign language can be expanded to all sorts of human communications. This is the theme of this film.

In working on editing *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, we experience the same difficulties as the characters in this film do, though some excellent native speakers help us in correcting and editing our English texts.

Englishization – An Audacious Project by Japanese Venture Rakuten

The CEO and chairman of the board of giant Japanese e-commerce company Rakuten, Hiroshi Mikitani, a very influential entrepreneur in

the IT business in Japan, recently published a book titled *Englishization* (Kodansha, 2012). In it he stressed the importance of English as a tool for business communication and his company recently adopted English as its official language, because he believes Rakuten could fall far behind its rivals if it does not use English as a means of communication in order to acquire up-to-date information as globalization progresses. According to the book, English can be merely a tool for communication and you do not have to speak it perfectly or even very well, but speaking English well enough to make yourself understood is desirable, even if your grammar is incorrect.

Yet in our working experience, perhaps the most crucial impediment to communication with foreigners for Japanese is not English grammar or vocabulary, but Japanese thinking and attitudes, such as the excessive modesty in always starting a speech with apologies and saying they are too humble to speak on such an honorable occasion, etc. The Japanese are also very timid in using English and nervous about making tiny grammatical mistakes, though occasionally the fundamental problem in communication resides not in such trivial errors but in different values or cultural customs. Employees who are obliged to speak English as a company’s official language may be able to make themselves better understood by non-Japanese, since speaking English would change their customary ways of thinking and behavior and bring them closer to the international standard. Language is a key element of culture, and thus culture will be transformed if you speak another language.

Photo: photolibary

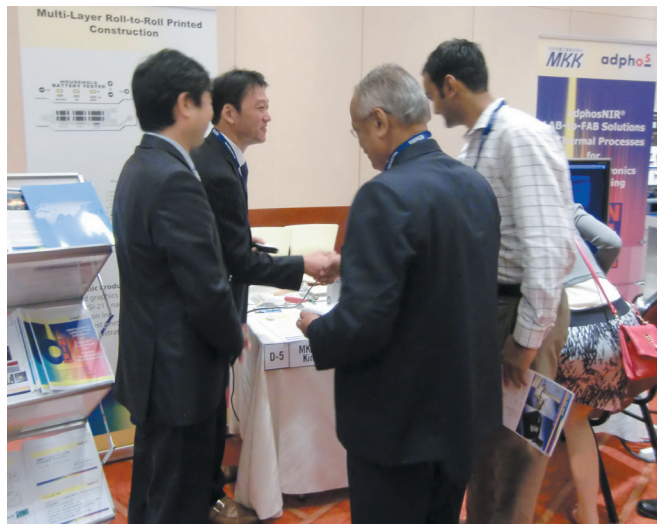


Japan SPOTLIGHT shares this view with Mr. Mikitani and in accordance with this idea discussed in *Englishization*, we have organized our editorial committee as an international team consisting of various nationalities such as Chinese, Indian, French, Swedish and American. Our common official language is English. On behalf of the chief editor, I would like to make our magazine more readable for our non-Japanese readers by selecting such committee members.

One of our members, Sanjeev Sinha, has recently written an article for the Japanese newspaper Nikkei stressing the importance of cultural diversity in Japan in stimulating our economy and business. In his view, foreigners and women can provide new ideas and create innovation in terms of management as well as technology to help stimulate the economy. Entrepreneurship based upon new ideas is the only locomotive to encourage growth in mature economies like Japan's, in contrast to the Japanese economy in the 1960s and 1970s when catching up with advanced nations was the way to achieve high economic growth and was realized by relatively less creative mass technology and management processes.

Speaking English as an official language in Japanese companies, then, can contribute to increasing cultural diversity by expanding communication between Japanese and foreigners, and thus eventually leading to enhanced entrepreneurship.

Another member of our editorial committee, Keio University Prof. Mukesh Williams, is always saying that Japanese students in his class should speak much more assertively in English, no matter how poor their English may be. They should stop being shy. The obligation to speak English as a common official language could transform such shyness into frankness, as it would be the most suitable language in which to become more active.



Asahi's Endeavor to Promote "Englishization" through Internet

Japan SPOTLIGHT is not the only media to discuss Japanese ideas and initiatives on important public policy topics. The Asahi Shimbun, one of Japan's giant media organizations, is like ourselves showing entrepreneurship and initiative in publishing an e-journal.

PHOTO 1



We were impressed by the diversity of the languages on their e-journal website, which includes not only English but also Chinese and Korean. To achieve a truly deeply interconnected network in Asia, we certainly need websites in Asian languages as well as English. Our impression was supported by a remark by Junichi Furuyama, (*Photo 1*) director and executive editor of the International Division of Asahi Shimbun, who mentioned that the number of readers of their website through Facebook has now reached more than 170,000 and continues to grow.

The Asahi Shimbun used to publish an English newspaper in conjunction with The International Herald Tribune, but this recently ceased publication after the number of readers significantly decreased due to a shift from newspapers to the Internet, as well as a decline in the number of foreign residents in Japan after the economic crisis triggered by the Lehman shock. Since an English newspaper in Japan is generally read only by English-speaking people living in Japan, a decline in this population means an end of business. However, Mr. Furuyama and his team took note of the need to make Japanese issues better understood around the world and in particular to promote further interest in Japan, given a decline in international interest in the Japanese economy and business due to Japan's decreasing weight in global GDP. So they decided to replace the paper edition with an online journal, to exploit the expansion of the Internet as a global information source.

Immediately after the replacement of the printed newspaper by the online version in March 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred. Since then, Asahi's new business has been working well in dealing with concerns for Japan from all over the world. In particular, Harvard University became interested in cooperating with the Asahi in order to establish a comprehensive database on the disaster and Asahi will engage in this shortly.

Interview 2

Foreign concerns about Japan are today focused on energy and the environment following the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant crisis. How Japan will deal with nuclear power is currently the most significant international concern, and all the media in Japan should respond to this with energy and intelligence.

Japan is also considered a “smart” nation that can invent new technologies to mitigate global environmental concerns. The innovations of Sony and other Japanese businesses will draw interest from overseas, and the Asahi is focusing on such business initiatives in Japan.

The strength and competitiveness of the Asahi can be seen in the growing number of young Asian readers of its website, largely due to its unique analysis of Asian news, often distinct from that of the Western media. This convinces us of the leading role that the Japanese media could play in Asia. Further in-depth academic analysis of the news would be useful in attracting more readers.

In aiming to increase the number of readers, the Asahi's Chinese site will play an important role, since the number of followers through Twitter in China has already reached 900,000.

Mr. Furuyama also said it would be worth attempting to create discussions among researchers and academics studying Asia.

Japan's public relations activities relating to tourism, culture, the economy and so forth have been sporadic and inconsistent. By collaborating with public relations entities, including government ministries and tourism agencies, the Asahi's success could continue to expand.

IDTechEx Proves Technological Innovation Supports Media Innovation

Cara Harrington, event and marketing manager of IDTechEx, a British consulting firm that promotes business tie-ups in emerging technologies between producers and end-users, contacted *Japan*

PHOTO 2

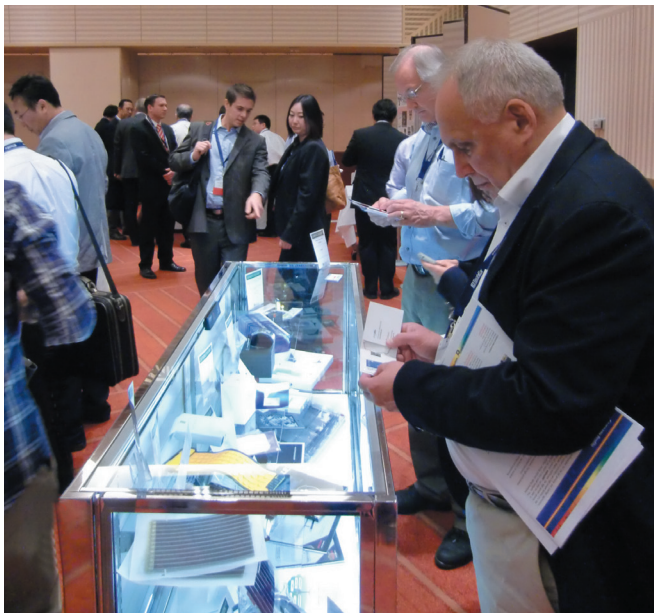


PHOTO 3



SPOTLIGHT to introduce their event called “Printed Electronics ASIA 2012” on Oct. 2 and 3 in Tokyo (*Photo 2*).

Printed electronics is a set of printing methods used to create electrical devices on various substrates, most importantly at the cheapest cost. E-paper is actually considered the first step in making use of printed electronics for a display. E-book publishers (*Japan SPOTLIGHT* is one of them) are one of the most important end-users of this technology. According to Ms. Harrington, they organize such events in the United States, Europe and Asia every year. The October event in Tokyo was the fifth one in Asia, following the first in Tokyo in 2007. They consider Asia to be a large potential market for printed electronics and have also organized an event twice in Hong Kong as well as in Tokyo.

The Internet is certainly today the main source of growth for the ICT industry and in Asia its expansion has been phenomenal, as English is an important common language on the Internet and in Asia.

Raghu Das, CEO of IDTechEx (*Photo 3*) with an academic background in physics, stressed the fun of this technology, replacing existing ones with new ones, which could transform our industrial structure drastically. This technology can be applied to a wide range of areas, including touch panels in automobiles, that would provide technology producers with an enormous market. IDTechEx says the market for printed and thin film electronics will be \$9.46 billion in 2012 and will grow to \$63.28 billion by 2022.

Innovation in the media, such as at the Asahi, can be ignited by such supply-side innovation in printed electronics. “Englishization” would further promote it and thus we will have an enriched in-depth communication network in Asia in the near future, perhaps a borderless Asia where we will rarely find ourselves being “lost in translation”.

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