

Japan Diary

Getting the Maximum From Your Medium

Don't be funny

Any U.S. Department of Agriculture official who comes to Japan and says, "Cut the bull. Where's the beef?" should be prepared for the line to fall flat. The problem is that these are Americanisms which do not translate into Japanese. If he is lucky, it will be translated as meaning that the Japanese side's actions are not living up to their billing. If not, he will get a literal translation (and a somewhat confusing one at that, since if you cut a bull, that *is* beef).

Misunderstandings occur even between two people who speak the same language. When they do not share a common cultural/linguistic context, misunderstanding is all the more likely. And when you have somebody else in the middle relaying messages, the potential for disaster is infinite.

Yet given the scarcity of non-Japanese who speak Japanese—and of Japanese who are comfortable in any other language—interpretation is unavoidable. And there are ways to minimize the risks.

There to help you

Perhaps the most important thing is to remember that the interpreter is there to help you. If the interpreter does not understand you, the interpretation is going

ing to be garbled and your message lost.

The main way to make sure the interpreter understands you is to speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Mumbling is out. Puns are punishment. And speed kills.

It helps if you can let the interpreters in on what you want to say ahead of time. Even when you are just going to speak from rough notes, it is a good idea to give the interpreter a copy well ahead of time. These notes are not so the interpreter can translate them. They are so the interpreter can read them over and see what you want to say, where you want to go, and how you want things to hold together. This is especially important if there is some recurring theme that you want to hang the presentation on. Knowing ahead of time how you want to develop a phrase will help the interpreter give the translation similar nuances, ultimately helping you convey your message. Standing tall and standing up straight are not necessarily the same thing, even though both are questions of posture.

Problem areas

We have all had the experience of a speaker who decided to be "nice to the interpreters" and write out his speech ahead of time. A few of these people even remember to give the interpreters a copy of the speech (preferably more than two minutes before they start). But they have their thoughts all organized, and this is supposed to be nice to the interpreter.

The organization is nice, but written texts have less repetition and "play." And then they proceed to read the speech in a machine-gun monotone. Everybody reads faster than he speaks extemporaneously. There is no way the interpreters can keep up unless they are also reading a

translation. And even then, it is almost certain that a good speaker will deviate from his prepared text, meaning that the interpreter has to zig when the speaker zigs and zag when he zags.

If your text is going to be prepared, make sure your interpreter is too.

However, interpreters are not retarded, and speaking too slowly is just as bad as going too fast. "I asked...why...he...wanted...to go...to Brazil." In Japanese, the word order would be "Why he to Brazil want to went I asked." The interpreter cannot do anything until the English sentence is finished, so please don't speak in less than complete thoughts.

Numbers are another source of danger. Western numbers come in groups of three, Japanese numbers in groups of four. Thus 33 billion (33,000,000,000) is 330 *oku* (330,000,0000). Saying "Why don't we make that 34?" is going to cause trouble. It means why not make the 33 billion 34 billion, but may, in the heat of the moment, get translated as making that 330 *oku* 334 *oku*, which is going to cause trouble if you get an agreement on different numbers.

The same sort of thing happens when you talk about "a quarter billion." In Japanese, this is not a quarter of anything. It is 2.5 *oku*, and the mental gymnastics required to go from a quarter billion to 250 million to 2.5 *oku* can be somewhat daunting when several different numbers are being bandied about.

People's names are another problem. Among the American delegation, he may be "Don," but the Japanese delegation is going to know him as "Secretary Regan," and it is not fair to expect your interpreters to keep a scorecard of all the



players. And please don't call him by some private nickname.

Not a party to the talks

If you follow these do's and don't's, you will be able to rely on your interpreter—and hence to observe common civility and look your audience right in the eye. Even in one-on-one negotiations, remember that you are not negotiating with the interpreter. Don't talk to the interpreter. Talk to the other side, and rely on the interpreter to convey your message while you establish eye contact.

Likewise, it is not the interpreter's job, nor is he competent to make value judgments. Don't talk for half an hour and then turn to the interpreter and say, "We don't have time for the whole thing. Just give a summary." The interpreter should not be expected to do that, nor should he take that responsibility.

Along this same line, please don't try to bring the interpreter into the negotiations. Interpreters are not mediators. Nor are we able to take sides. Our job is to ensure that each side is able to present its position. If this is accurately conveyed, we hope it will lead to understanding. If there is understanding of each other's positions, we hope there will be agree-

ment. But whether or not there is understanding and agreement is, literally, none of our business.

(Ken Yokota, president of Linguabank)

Bookshelf

From Bonsai to Levi's

By George Fields

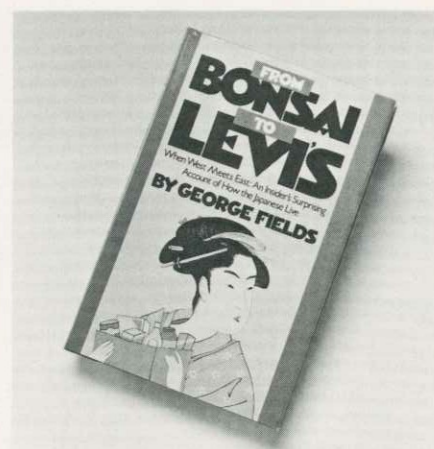
Published by Macmillan Publishing Company

1983, New York

213 pages, US\$14.95

Seen from overseas, the Japanese market looks too big to pass up. Seen up-close, it appears deceptively similar to other industrialized markets. Modern telecommunications, Kentucky Fried Chicken, rush-hour traffic jams... they're all here.

Yet George Fields points out in *From Bonsai to Levi's* that the leap of logic that leads the Western businessman to assume that "these people" should be doing things the same way they are done in Peoria—and its corollary that any failure



to penetrate the Japanese market is part of a deliberate Japanese plot to keep out imports—is dangerous because it blinds the newcomer to the many underlying cultural differences that make Japan a distinctly separate market.

Fields is no newcomer. Born and raised in Japan, fluent in Japanese, and with nearly two decades of marketing experience in Japan, he has seen and learned enough to recognize the need to fit local cultural values.

Yet he also knows not to pontificate. Instead, he shows us around. He takes us

Taste of Tokyo

Toritako—specialist in fowl dishes

"Toritako" specializes in fowl. It is a small restaurant located in Asakusa, the colorful plebeian old downtown of Tokyo. It was founded in 1927 by the father of the present proprietor.

It has become extremely difficult nowadays for people living in Tokyo, even Japanese, to experience the nostalgic atmosphere of old Japan. But Toritako is right next to the compounds of Sensoji Temple, popularly known as Asakusa Kannon temple, and Sanja Shrine, where the atmosphere of old Japan still lingers. A person standing at Toritako's entrance and looking at the Kannon Temple and the five-storied pagoda can momentarily forget the hustle and bustle of Tokyo's concrete urban jungle.

A huge paper lantern with the name "Toritako" brush-painted on it hangs at the entrance and is visible from 100 meters away, making the restaurant easy to find. The lantern is reminiscent of the old days when Tokyo was known as Edo.

Another feature of this restaurant is its second-generation proprietor, Mr. T.

Masuda, who is a true *Edokko* (the natives of Tokyo, known for their high-spirited character). During business hours, he keeps the front entrance locked. He looks out the window of the kitchen beside the entrance and opens the door only for those who pass his scrutiny. Drunks and sinister-looking characters are kept out.

The proprietor prepares only ten servings of each dish a day. He keeps a well trained cat which goes out when the first customer of the day walks in. After the restaurant closes at 9 o'clock, the master whistles the theme song from "Headlight" and the cat comes home.

The proprietor describes himself as one of the three "original characters" of Asakusa. Who would doubt it?

The restaurant is so small that the tables and counter can accommodate only two dozen customers. The specialties of the house include fried skin of *aigamo*, a crossbreed of wild and domesticated ducks, garnished with grated radish and chopped green onion, *aigamo* cooked in an iron pan *sukiyaki* style, two or three skewers a day of *yakitori* of the salted skin of locally-raised chickens (not broilers), *sake*-steamed chicken liver which goes so well with French bread that some regular European customers bring their own bread with them, and *tatakinabe*, or minced fowl cooked in an iron pot.

The bill usually comes to around ¥5,000

per person including drinks. The taste is No. 1 in Tokyo; the atmosphere is No. 1 in Tokyo; and the idiosyncracies of the proprietor are No. 1 in Tokyo. It is well worth asking a Japanese friend to take you to Toritako.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)



Business hours: 18:00-21:00
Closed on Mondays. Reservation necessary.

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