



A Rewarding Look Back



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Looking Back

I've had the great pleasure of being able to work on two Genius dictionaries, the G4 dictionary that was published a few years back, and now the current GJE3. I've found both projects greatly rewarding, but also immensely challenging. The work, itself, if taken one sentence at a time, isn't extremely difficult or taxing (though there is the occasional brain-twister, usually due to translation difficulties), but taken as a whole—an entire dictionary, stretched over a number of years—it can quite easily become exhausting and draining. But, as with the G4 project, and now with the close of the GJE3 project as well, I must say that it's extremely rewarding work.

Goals and Guidelines

Back when I began editing dictionaries, based on Taishukan's own guidelines, I quickly developed my own thoughts and guidelines as to how each example sentence should be. First, they must be written in modern English. They must be clear and concise. They must use common and natural vocabulary, grammar, and phrasing. And lastly, they should be immediately usable—the end user should be able to take any example sentence in the dictionary, put their name in there, and use it AS IS.

Having such clear goals and guidelines in mind

made the work go much easier and much smoother, though it did add to the amount of work that had to be done—some examples that were fine grammatically ended up being too academic or too old fashioned at times, and so even these “technically OK” examples needed to be reworked.

The Practical Side

On the practical side of things, it was fairly easy. For most of the work a spreadsheet file would arrive via e-mail and then the first chance I got I would sit down and work through the entire file. For the first few years, I would receive files with about 300 example sentences to check! And if I was feeling somewhat on the ball, I might be able to move through 100 examples in about an hour, though I have to admit that as the years moved by I grew to be much slower because the unthinkable happened—I started to get tired! *smile* So, I would move sentence by sentence and, going back and comparing with the Japanese example if need be and on rare occasion even attempting a new translation of the sentence. The key, though, to this stage is to remember that you're not working alone. When I attempt to translate from Japanese, even though I don't fully understand the nuance or perhaps some of the cultural background necessary to do a great job, work-

ing together with my Japanese partner, together we CAN do a great job! Another key here, though, is to stay flexible and not stubbornly insist that everything I do is perfect—it's the teamwork that produces a great dictionary.

Working Together

Part of the joy of working with several JP partners was that you slowly got to know each other, though the means of communication was rather funny! Of course we'd send little hellos and common banter in our e-mails, attaching the work files at the end, but a great deal of our more interesting exchanges was found within the files themselves. You see, while working on a file, there is a place to make the corrections and then a place right next to it to leave comments. When an example sentence doesn't need corrected, no comment is required. And yet, for the examples that surprised me, or shocked me, or reminded me of a funny story, or reminded me of my past—for these examples I would add a little comment back to my Japanese partner. Sometimes it was as simple as this:

Example: “a person who always wears the same clothes”

My comment: “I'm afraid this describes me a lot of times ... :-)”

And sometimes it was more serious, such as our exchange just days after the March 11th earthquake:

Example: “talk about one's terrifying experiences from the traffic accident”

My comment: “Maybe we should say ‘earthquake’ at this point?”

Challenges

As mentioned briefly above, some of the most

common challenges we faced was dealing with “academic” and “old” or literary-sounding English. While these examples have their place in the real world, they actually have a very limited domain and are less useful to the end user than straightforward, common, everyday examples. Other common challenges we faced (and actually more difficult to correct!) had to do with translation difficulties. When translating from one language to another, very often it's difficult, if not impossible, to find words in the target language (i.e., English) that precisely match the source language (i.e., Japanese). An easily recognizable example is this:

Japanese: お疲れ様でした！

English: Thank you for working hard!

A more direct translation might be, “You must be tired!”, but that sounds more like an insult in English, akin to saying how weak they must be. So, based on cultural background and a knowledge of the types of things that are typically said in similar situations (social background), the most appropriate translation is chosen.

Final Thoughts

But, despite the challenges and the long-term commitment required when working on such a vast project, it really is a rewarding experience to work on a dictionary. Not only do I get to work together with some great people, but I also know that thousands of other people will be trusting this dictionary in their studies, at their jobs, and perhaps even with their friends to communicate across languages. And it's my hope that our efforts, in some way, help to bridge that communication gap and bring two cultures one step closer together.

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