

BILINGUAL

Take your *taimingu* when translating loan words

By DANIEL MORALES

Special to The Japan Times

The English translation of the manga "Death Note" by Tsugumi Ōba has sold millions of copies around the world — with barely a mention anywhere of the glaring translation error in the title and throughout the work: "Death Note" should in fact be "Death Notebook."

While the Japanese word *nōto* (ノート) derives from the English word "note," in common use it always means "notebook." Fortunately, "Death Note" makes a catchy title and can be read at a stretch as the "notes" in the "Death Notebook." But this mistake offers a valuable lesson for students of Japanese and translators: Loan words live a life separate from the words that gave birth to them.

Nōto is not unique in this sense. Japan has a long history of commandeering words from other languages and making them its own. Kobo Daishi, one of Japan's first exchange students, allegedly brought back thousands of kanji from China in the eighth century. Words from Portugal and Holland arrived through Nagasaki roughly 1,000 years later. More recently, Japanese has borrowed from English and other languages, and hence there are now legions of words that require thought before you can convert them back into their source language.

For example, the Japanese word *kameraman* (カメラマン) can mean "cameraman" but more frequently refers to "photographer." *Stōvu* (ストーブ) are the kerosene heaters used in Japanese homes in winter — not the ovens that an American might expect. Most people who have lived in Japan will know that *aisu* (アイス) is ice cream, *kōri* (氷) is ice and *jūsu* (ジュース) connotes a whole range of beverages including fruit juice, cola and sports drinks.

On the other hand, some loan words are used along the same lines as the original. The French word *enquête*, in Japanese becomes *ankēto* (アンケート, questionnaire/survey). *Yubikitasu* (ユビキタス) is used correctly in Japanese more and more "ubiquitously." But even words that sound like and mean the same thing as the foreign equivalent need to be handled with care.

Taimingu (タイミング, timing) is a good example. While clearly an English word in origin, it exemplifies the way words quickly work their way into native Japanese patterns. *Naisu taimingu* (ナイスタイミング) is used fairly often (it has 130,000-plus search results on Google) and can be rendered back into English without much difficulty. *Taimingu yoku* (タイミングよく), however, is more natural (560,000-plus search results on Google). Here, *taimingu* has been incorporated into a natural Japanese phrase — a noun followed by the adverb *yoku*, which, when used to modify a verb, implies that an action is done "with a generous amount of" the noun. Examples include *ikioiyoku* (勢いよく, "with a generous amount of force"), *nakayoku* (仲良く, "... of friendliness"), *kokochiyoku* (心地よく, "... of comfort"), and *tegiwayoku* (手際よく, "... of skill").

Taimingu yoku can be found in many video games — often modifying phrases like *botan wo osu* ("press the button[s]"). Developers use it when the player must input a series of well-timed button presses to accomplish a certain action.

It can be tempting in this case to try to preserve *taimingu* in translation by using the English word "timing," but "Press the button good-timing-ly" is clearly wrong, "Press the button with good timing" is grammatically sound but still awkward, and "Press the button with a generous amount of timing" is very strange. "Press the button at the right time" and "Press the buttons in the proper rhythm/order" are decent candidates, depending on the specific content of the game in question.

Realizing the English word of origin can't be adjusted to fit the Japanese properties the word has taken on is not easy for rookie translators. They hem and haw, striving to be true to the source text; they may translate the word back to "timing" without even thinking. Japanese game developers, too, often struggle to cast aside the crutch that katakana words provide; if the word "timing" is present in the English translation, they feel certain at least one word was translated accurately, no matter how poor their English is. Being familiar with the different implications words have, and being conscious enough to step back and carefully consider all words equally, can make you a more accurate speaker of the language.

The way Japanese uses words of foreign origin grates on purists, both Japanese and others. What many of them fail to realize, and what the loan words shown above help prove, is that although words may have originated from another language, they are Japanese now. To draw a culinary analogy: If the Japanese want to put cod roe and mayonnaise on pizza, that doesn't mean it's no longer pizza; it's just Japanese pizza.

The Japan Times: Wednesday, March 31, 2010
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)