

The Pitfalls of Machine Translation:

a lesson in how to write incomprehensible English

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Type the word 「翻訳」 or “translation” into an Internet search engine and a number of websites will be listed offering free, instantaneous translation of text between Japanese, English, and other languages. Websites offering this kind of service include Excite, Nifty, Infoseek, OCN, So-net, Systran, and AltaVista. To translate text from Japanese to English at any of these websites, you simply type or paste a sentence or paragraph into the form provided, select which languages you are translating from and to, and then click the “translate” button. Within a few seconds, an English translation of the text you entered will appear on the screen.

With this kind of machine translation so widely available on the Internet today, some students will invariably be tempted to use it to “write” papers or other assignments in English. Rather than struggling to come up with the correct grammatical forms and vocabulary, one can instead produce a complete paper in English by simply typing it out in Japanese, feeding it into the translation form at Excite or any of the websites mentioned above, pressing the “translate” button and - presto! - the paper is finished. Those of us who have taught writing courses may well have received papers from students written in this manner and pondered what to do about them, and what to say to students about machine translation in general.

Ideally, all that would be required to dissuade students from using machine translation for writing assignments in English would be an appeal to their sense of academic honesty: if a machine-translated text is submitted as one’s own work, this is a misrepresentation of one’s actual effort and thus a form of cheating. Additionally, instructors can point out to students that by using online translation services they are doing themselves a disservice in that they will not improve their writing skills in English; using machine translation is thus at best a waste of the student’s own time.

Yet another approach to help deter students from using online machine translation is to show them how poorly it actually works. Indeed, while producing a paper

via machine translation may be relatively painless for the student, what the instructor will in turn be faced with is a text that is littered with bizarre grammar and word choice. Consider the following translation of the opening lines from a recent “Tensei Jingo” column in *Asahi Shimbun*, made with Excite’s online translation service :

“Can’t export of arms tell about any not carrying out clearly?” In the Lower House Standing Committee on Budget for 76 years, it said so and Senator Yoshiaki Masaki of the Komei Party approached then Prime Minister Miki. It is the question when taking out the government view which a 3 Kiuchi big building advances further 1 step nine years after since the Sato Cabinet shows the dispute country directly concerned etc. the three principles controlling arms exports of not exporting arms.

Online translation services do not always produce results as incomprehensible as this, but the same type of grammatical and lexical gibberish is a telltale mark of an essay or report produced by a student using machine translation.

An easy way to make students aware of how poorly online machine translation works is to provide them with some actual samples. Below are two short samples of text translated not from Japanese to English, but from English to Japanese, to make it easier for students to see what is wrong with the translations :

Japanese translation	Original English
<p>バリーの結束は3つのホームランに昨晚当たったが、巨人はまだ敗北で行った。もうゲームを失えば、プレーオフにその作成のほとんどチャンスを有する。</p>	<p>Barry Bonds hit three home runs last night, but the Giants still went down in defeat. If they lose any more games, they have little or no chance of making it to the playoffs.</p>
<p>「ないそれ自身を恐れることをしかし恐れることを何も。」完全に正直であるためには、私は意味されるものがそれによって知らない。</p>	<p>“There is nothing to fear but fear itself.” To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what is meant by that.</p>

If students can see specific examples like these, where quite plain English is rendered into very peculiar if not quite incomprehensible Japanese, they may think twice about using machine translation for their English writing assignments.

Someday in the future, machine translation between Japanese and English may improve to the point where one will be able feed a chunk of text into a computer in one language, and out will come a translation in the other language that is as

comprehensible and clear as the original text. In the meantime, we should at least make ourselves aware of the proliferation of free, online machine translation and be prepared to tell our students what it can - and cannot - do for them.

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