19 Upgrading Tokyo's linguistic infrastructure for the 2020 Games

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Multilingualism is not an Olympic discipline, but if it were, Tokyo would certainly deserve a medal. As part of the officially proclaimed concept of *omotenashi* (hospitality), administrative agents in and around the metropolitan region have taken great pains to linguistically prepare the city for the 2020 Summer Games. And they are well-advised to do so, since official estimates calculate a total number of up to 40 million inbound tourists to Japan in 2020.

Monolingual 1964

Back in 1964, the situation could not have been more different. When Tokyo first hosted the Summer Olympic Games, the number of foreign visitors was so small that the organizers apparently did not give much thought to their linguistic needs. In total, the event drew no more than 50,000 people from abroad, 9,000 participating athletes already included. Even though the Games did motivate various larger infrastructure projects, among them the completion of the Tokaido Shinkansen bullet train, it seems that language issues were not on the agenda.

The linguistic infrastructure before, during, and after Tokyo 1964 was by and large monolingual. The few concessions to non-Japanese visitors at the time included some bilingual signage around the sports venues and a set of 20 pictograms, then named *shiruetto* (“silhouettes”), to indicate the various sports that were represented at the Olympics.¹ Even well into the early 1980s most public signs were monolingual. Here is one episode that captures the overall situation: In October 1982, an American tourist was knocked down by a car while crossing a street in Tokyo's Minato Ward. The “no crossing” sign at this particularly dangerous spot was in Japanese only. In response to the accident, the local Azabu police station decided to set up Japanese-English warning signs at this and another 15 spots across the ward. The attention this comparatively small event received – several

national newspapers dedicated whole articles to the initiative – testifies to the news value of bilingual signage at the beginning of the 1980s.

Between summit and soccer

An important momentum for the promotion of multilingual signs was the Tokyo G8 Summit in May 1986. In July 1985 the Ministry of Construction had announced plans for a nationwide replacement of Japanese-only road signs within ten years. A model project for the metropolitan region was initiated in November 1985. The scope of the project was to set up 770 Japanese–English signs on expressways in the larger metropolitan region and on surface roads in the center of the city. While still small-scale in scope, this can be considered one of the earliest administrative programs for turning Tokyo into a more “readable” place to foreign visitors.

In 1989 the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) started summarizing the internationalization policies of its agencies and the lower administrative levels. Their annual reports detail the instalment of bilingual road signs, street block signs and area maps, bus and subway signs, evacuation area signage, explanation plates at pedestrian lights, signs informing about garbage disposal procedures, guidance signs inside administrative buildings, and many more. A review of these documents suggests that by the end of the 1990s bilingual signs in the streets of Tokyo were becoming a sight much less extraordinary than they had been only a decade earlier.² Taken together, the metropolitan area spearheaded many developments that were later followed by other administrative regions across Japan. A certain time-lag between urban and rural environments persists to the present day.

Around the turn of the century, we witness another linguistic novelty: the occurrence of Japanese–English signs with additional translations in Chinese and Korean, most notably signs on evacuation and emergency procedures in all four languages. One likely motivation for the new visibility of Chinese and Korean was another major sports event, the 2002 Soccer World Cup, which was jointly hosted by Japan and South Korea. The new focus on the languages of Japan’s neighboring countries also reflects an increased awareness – and acknowledgment – of Japan’s two oldest and largest linguistic minorities: speakers of Chinese and Korean.

Getting ready for 2020

In 2014, one year after Tokyo had won the bid for the 2020 Games, the “Bureau of Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 Preparation” (official English name) was established as a new agency within the

Metropolitan Government. Among other things, the Bureau has been in charge of further promoting Tokyo's linguistic infrastructure and making the city more easily accessible to the millions of foreign visitors expected for the event. The various activities are summarized at www.2020games.metro.tokyo.jp/multilingual/examples/index.html.

One recent initiative by the Bureau is the Eat Tokyo Campaign. At a specifically designed website, restaurants and related businesses registered in Tokyo can create their own tailor-made menus in up to 13 languages. Based on these data, the site also functions as a multilingual search engine for foreign tourists to find a restaurant of their choice (www.menu-tokyo.jp/). Eat Tokyo also offers a set of pictograms related to eating and drinking, and so-called "communication sheets" with simple phrases that can be used in interaction with foreign customers. This outreach to the private sector, where it is much harder to coordinate language issues, constitutes a pioneering step towards spreading multilingualism beyond the scope of official agencies.

Also noteworthy in this respect is the Bureau's promotion of VoiceTra, a smartphone application that translates verbal communication between

Figure 19.1 Train stations depicted on the English-language subway map.

Source: © Barbara Holthus.

Japanese and non-Japanese speakers. Downloadable free of charge, it presently supports a total number of 17 languages (<http://voicetra.nict.go.jp/en/index.html>). Technical innovations like VoiceTra may one day present a feasible solution to language problems where they hurt most: in one-on-one situations between individuals.

An entirely different approach to multilingualism is information provision that does not rely on language at all. An example already mentioned is pictograms, such as those developed by the EcoMo Foundation, the additional items from the Eat Tokyo campaign, and, most recently, a set of standardized symbols explaining Japan's sophisticated culture of toilet hygiene (www.sanitary-net.com/global/pictgram/). Another important scheme is the use of colors and numbers to indicate train lines and stations, which can be of great help in finding one's way through the maze of Tokyo's public transport (see Figure 19.1). For instance, where in the past you had to look for Kokuritsu-kyogijo Station on Oedo Line, the National Stadium, you now just head for E25.

The politics of multilingualism

Moving from a monolingual environment to one designed to accommodate larger numbers of speakers with differing linguistic backgrounds cannot be accomplished overnight. Apart from political willingness to do so – no small feat for a society with a strong self-image of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity – quite a number of delicate decisions need to be made. Some of them are at least as political as they are linguistic.

An obvious point is the selection of languages. English, Chinese, and Korean can now be identified as the three “other” languages of Tokyo. In road traffic, public transport, and other officially regulated environments, it seems that since the 1990s an English byline has become all but obligatory. In addition, there are now increasingly large numbers of signs offering information in all four languages. The symbolic significance of this new visibility of the languages of Japan's neighbors, on official signs in the heart of the city, can hardly be overrated.

With respect to Chinese, an additional decision had to be made as to which variety of the language should be chosen. The situation is rather complex here, in that mainland China and Singapore use simplified, short-style, characters, whereas Taiwan and Hong Kong still write in traditional, long-style, characters. That the choice was eventually made in favor of the former, at least on most of the official signs, is also a political statement.

Spelling problems

Though much less political in nature, the Romanization of place names is a problem of high complexity. Since two slightly divergent systems exist for putting Japanese into alphabet, it is important to avoid inconsistencies. Official manuals have made a choice here in favor of the Hepburn system, which is taken to be more easily comprehensible to readers with an English-language background. Just compare “Shinjuku” (Hepburn) to “Sinzyuku,” which would be the rendition of the toponym in the corresponding Kunrei system. Other specifications on Romanization include the use of hyphens, macrons and capitals, all intended to eliminate irregularities and arrive at a unified set of spelling rules.³

Things can get really complex when it comes to the Romanization of place names that combine common and proper nouns. Take toponyms like Arakawa or Yamate-dori. The former is a well-known river that runs through the northern parts of the city, the latter is one of Tokyo's main ring roads. The basic rule is that the proper noun part should be Romanized, whereas the common noun is translated into English. The problem is that in many cases the common noun part has become part of the toponym itself. Just as in our two examples, where *kawa* means “river” and *dōri* “road,” respectively. As a compromise, official documents have come to

Figure 19.2 Sign giving instructions on how to behave on a crowded platform.

Source: © Peter Backhaus.

recommend Romanization of the full term, added by a translation for the common noun part. For our two examples, this gives us the somewhat redundant but no doubt most easily accessible renditions “Arakawa River” and “Yamate-dori Avenue.”

Particularly on signs with more complex or variegated contents, it is frequently the case that translations are provided only in part. An example from public transport is presented in Figure 19.2. The bilingualism here is rather dysfunctional, since the real “information” – that people should move on to the middle of the platform – remains inaccessible without thorough literacy in Japanese. Fortunately, such instances of “make-believe bilingualism” by the eve of Tokyo 2020 have become increasingly rare sights.

Farewell, monolingual Japan?

Signs are one thing; real language competence is another. The gap between the two is particularly striking in domains such as public transport, where written information is now commonly available not only in Japanese and English, but in Chinese and Korean as well. In addition, most train companies in the past couple of years have started using pre-recorded announcements in a bilingual, Japanese–English, format, and here too, Chinese and Korean are catching up. And yet it is still rather exceptional to hear a live announcement in a station or train in a language other than Japanese, except on the Shinkansen. Most of the staff, it seems, do not live up to the increasingly multilingual infrastructure their companies now provide. This is not necessarily a problem, but may well become one in emergency situations such as a major earthquake, where most signs and pre-recorded messages will become all but useless.

In fact, lack of linguistic competence continues to be the weakest link in Tokyo’s numerous preparations for the Games. This is also one of the main findings in a large-scale study by the TMG, in which foreign visitors at departure lounges in Tokyo’s two airports, Narita and Haneda, were interviewed. Asked about their experiences with issues such as eating and drinking (average satisfaction of 85.3%), accommodation (76.3%), availability of travel information (69.2%), money exchange (63.9%) and a number of others, language competence (43.2%) was unanimously ranked lowest.⁴

As these data suggest, there is still room for improvement in the linguistic infrastructure of Tokyo, particularly when it comes to the thorny issue of communication between individuals. Advancements in translation technology may go some way here, but will unlikely eliminate language problems once and for all. Given these circumstances, Tokyo’s efforts in the discipline of multilingualism may not deserve a gold medal yet. But they certainly deserve a place on the podium.

Notes

- 1 Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport. 2014. www.mlit.go.jp/common/001043229.pdf. Data on pictograms from Mainichi Shimbun. 1964. “20 kyōgi no shiruetto” [20 silhouettes for the sport disciplines]. 14 May: 14.
- 2 Backhaus, Peter. 2010. “Modernity rewritten: Linguistic landscaping in Tokyo.” In Heinrich, Patrick, Christian Galan (eds). *Language life in Japan: Transformations and prospects*. London, New York: Routledge: 154–169.
- 3 Tokyo Metropolitan Government. 2014. www.2020games.metro.tokyo.jp/multilingual/council/pdf/honpen_doro_taiyaku.pdf.
- 4 Tokyo Metropolitan Government. 2017. www.sangyo-rodo.metro.tokyo.jp/toukei/tourism/29kekka.pdf.