

How the When Determines the What: 「悔しい」 and Other Conundrums

by Simon Prentis

I'm in Hiroshima with Yoko Ono. It's July, and she's speaking at the opening of her exhibition 希望の路, a show she's put together as the most recent recipient of the Hiroshima Art Prize (<http://imaginepeace.com/archives/13631>, for the curious). Amongst other things, I'm on the bill as her 専属通訳 – even though she doesn't really need one, is speaking in Japanese to an audience that is entirely Japanese, and no-one except her monolingual American staff need a translation. She's talking about how she felt when she first heard about the 3.11 震災 and nuclear meltdown at Fukushima. She says the first word that came to her was 悔しい. She repeats this with strong emphasis 「悔しい!!」. 悔しい that such a thing should happen in Japan, which has already been through one nuclear nightmare. 悔しい that there's apparently nothing that can be done about it. She goes on to remark that it's a quintessentially Japanese expression, and how she can't think of an English word that captures it. Well, I know what she means, sort of. Right off the bat, I can't find one either. But it grates with me. I feel 悔しい not to be able to. Mortified, even.



Yoko Ono's "The Road Of Hope / 希望の路"

Later, at dinner, we talk about it. I say that maybe "Goddammit!" has something of the flavour of what she meant by 悔しい in that context, but though she accepts the spirit of the suggestion, she's still not having it. "So I was right then, there isn't one word for it!" she insists. This seems slightly unfair, since strictly speaking her original remark in Japanese didn't limit the possibilities to one word. In any case, these days 'goddammit' is effectively a single lexical item, almost as irrevocably divorced from its original constituents as 'goodbye'. But I somehow sense this is neither the time nor the place to force the issue. Nor do I feel she's in the mood for the intended humour of my fall-back suggestion of "Oh no!" I tactfully revert to my tofu steak.

Some of you are probably thinking, "What's the problem? 悔しい is just 'mortifying', isn't it? End of story." And according to the dictionary, it is. The Green Goddess is unequivocal: "vexatious, vexing, mortifying." The problem is, those are no longer words that ordinary people think or say, let alone Yoko Ono. You might still be able to find the odd – very odd – person who occasionally says "How mortifying!", but apart from the fact that hardly anyone under the age of 30 would understand what they meant, it's as if you'd need a DipFD (Diploma in Funeral Directing, since you ask) to be able to pull it off with confidence. Then there's the 'vexatious/vexing' combo, but surely, no-one can knowingly have been good and proper vexed since at least Meiji times. Though we may have once had these fabulous words in English, they have long gone the way of such extravagances as "I remain your humble and obedient servant". Like it or not, these days we're in a world where people are much more likely to say they're *glottal-stop* "guttled" – and "Well gu「ッ」ed" at that.

But that's not hitting the spot either. Later, I give it some more thought. Just what is 悔しい expressing anyway? The 「悔」 character is a bit misleading, since it's clearly added after the fact, as it the case for all those other heartfelt 「～しい」 words with which Japanese is replete: 惜しい、苦しい、楽しい、著しい、羨ましい、厚かましい、怪しい、凶々しい、忌々しい. Of course 'regret' is integral to what feeling 悔しい is all about, but it isn't just regret. There's frustration, disappointment, annoyance, anger and even a trace of shame in there, in the same way as the analogously affective "～ing" words of English bleed into each other. There's quite an overlap between, say, *upsetting*, *frustrating*, *irritating* and *annoying*, let alone *humiliating*, *mortifying* and *embarrassing* – they are all more-or-less tinged with elements of each other, and which one suits a particular context best will depend on a suite of factors impacting that particular moment. That isn't to say that distinctions can't be made; the problem is more that the attempt to parse them sets up a false dilemma. The search for a word that is "equivalent" to another, Thesaurus notwithstanding, is doomed to failure not because one language is necessarily richer than another, but because words themselves are only ever a suggestion, a pointer, or – as Saussure had it – a sign. They represent something, but they are not that thing. Whatever that thing (object or emotion) is, words are simply the approximate tags we use to track it.

A few weeks ago there was a brief debate on J-Net about the word 'stale' and whether there was a single Japanese equivalent – the consensus being that there wasn't. You could argue that Japanese is deficient in not having a single word for such an 'obvious' concept. Or you could argue that English is deficient in not having a wider range of words to define more specific states of staleness in air, liquid and food.) But such arguments miss the point. Words don't represent clearly defined abstract concepts that neatly match in different languages, they encode decisions made by different cultures in specific (and ever-changing) contexts. There's rarely a completely transparent one-to-one relationship, even with words representing such apparently elemental categories as *earth*, *air*, *fire*, or *water*, all of which are liable to have different cultural or metaphorical nuances in a particular tradition.

So there's an inevitable blurring of categories within the words themselves. But then there's also the question of register. A few months ago I was standing in for a colleague teaching an interpreting class. They were using a speech by a former Japanese prime minister talking about the pension system, which he described as 「ぼろぼろになった」。The students were trying to use sophisticated words like 'dilapidated' and 'decrepit'. Not necessarily wrong, of course. But in terms of the register in which he was speaking, not right either. Because the words you choose to express your meaning convey the level at which you are talking. ぼろぼろ may indeed mean the same thing as 荒廃 in an abstract sense, but it has a very different tone, and especially in the mouth of a politician, tone matters. ぼろぼろ is a visceral 大和言葉 which has a very different flavour to a 漢語 such as 荒廢. So to convey that sense of immediacy you need to find an earthier expression in English. It's probably overstepping the line to go for 'crap' (I don't think even the most bloke-y of our British politicians would yet stoop to such a word in public) but unless you use a more vernacular phrase like 'run-down' you are mis-communicating the level of the debate. I'm not sure I managed to come up with it at the time, but a phrase like 'not fit for purpose' conveys a good mixture of modish cliché and popular appeal in that context. On the other hand, a word like 'dilapidated' with its polished multi-syllabic snap risks coming off as patronizing in an age where the BBC even seems to feel embarrassed about using a word like 'apologise', preferring to use the phrase 'say sorry' instead, even in the most formal of contexts.

Then there's the question of cultural appropriacy. A few days ago I was drinking into the night with a Japanese client and the support group for an artist we were working with. The talk turns to the director of the art museum we've been dealing with that day, who is being criticized by the assembled company in his absence for being 'a wanker'. In part because I'm off duty – at least in my eyes – and partly because of the sensitivity of the subject, I'm not relaying everything that's being said at this point. But when I'm eventually asked by my bemused client what we're talking about, I tell him they think the museum director's a 「どうしようもないやつ」。He laughs in agreement, but one of the company, somewhat the worse for wine, asks me if I've really told him that the guy is a wanker. I tell him that that's not the specific word I've used, because that's not how the Japanese usually express that sentiment, but he's not to worry, because the message has got through. It's not the same, he says. You have to tell him he's a wanker. Don't people wank in Japan? Of course they do, I say, it's just that Japanese culture hasn't yet felt the need to use that particular metaphor to express disgust at rank ineptitude. So what does 'wanker' mean to the Japanese, then? Go on, ask him! It's starting to take on slightly racist overtones at this point. The drink is flowing and the pressure is mounting.

So I explain to my client what's going on, telling him they want to know whether Japanese people understand the literal image of a wanker. Concerned that – as the oldest person present – he's going to take offense, I apologise in advance for the crudity of the remarks, but my worry is groundless. Without missing a beat, he looks his interlocutor straight in the eye and says 「少なくとも、自慰するやつはまだそれぐらいのことができる。どうしようもないやつはそれでさえできない不能なんだ」。That sends a satisfying titter round the room, and the topic is swiftly changed.



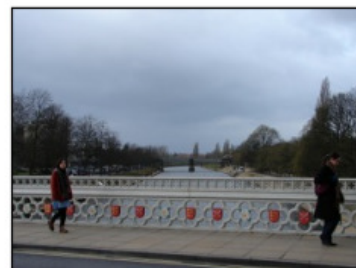
浅尾は「今までで一番くやしいです」という言葉を発した後に号泣した
Photo: news.livedoor.com

Because just as with a killer joke, when it comes to the visceral level it's not so much what you say, as how you tell 'em. Instructive as it may be to know what a *jerkwad* actually means, you don't necessarily need to know the full detail to feel the force of it, any more than you need to know what 畜生 literally means to be able to translate it. When you hear チクショウ! used in everyday speech, you're in no doubt what's being said, even if the wonderful online 英辞郎 at alc.co.jp is uncharacteristically coy on the matter. *Hell's teeth*, *criminy* and *zounds* don't immediately spring to the tongue these days. *Damn* and *blast* if you need to pull punches, but *shit*, *fuck* and even *goddammit* are more like it.

So we're back to *goddammit*. But then, it's different sides of the same coin. If you're feeling 悔しい, you might well say 畜生, if only to yourself. In a sense, 悔しい is a description of how you are feeling, whereas 畜生 is an expression of that feeling. Whether you choose to say one or the other will depend on the culture, the company and the circumstances you find yourself in. In other words, the 'when' will determine the 'what'. And as a translator/interpreter it's sensitivity to those parameters that determine the efficacy of the communication, and neither a dictionary nor an online resource is yet capable of divining them. Don't worry. We're still in a job.

Postscript: As I was reviewing this piece before sending it off, I thought I'd just check on Google Translate to see what it offered for 悔しい. And blow my size 12 tabi off, it did better than all the others, coming up with 'unfair'. Admittedly you'd not use it like that. But "How unfair!" (or even "That's so unfair!!") is really not bad, certainly an option I'd not thought of, and perhaps even closer than the other suggestions to what Yoko Ono had in mind when she was thinking 「悔しい！」 about Fukushima. So that's another vote for the statistically-based approach to machine translation, and also perhaps a sign, depressingly, that that the hard machines are closer on our softer heels than we might necessarily like to think...

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2011 J-Net AGM Saturday 14 January 2012, York

The 2011 J-Net AGM will be held at the Bar Convent in historic York, which is fondly remembered by those who attended the previous meeting there. The Bar Convent is a short walk from York Station, and close to the city centre. We have a provisional schedule for the day, and venues for getting together the night before and having dinner on the day will also be announced. The fee for the day, including all workshops and lunch, is £25.00. The AGM itself is free.

- 09:30-10:00 Arrival at the Bar Convent
- 10:00-10:45 *Patents* (1)
- 11:00-11:45 *Patents* (2)
- 12:00-13:00 *Teaching translation* presented by Jules Tuff
- Lunch
- 14:00-15:00 *Becoming MITI* presented by Nick Rosenthal, Chairman of Council ITI
- 14:15-16:30 AGM

The position of **PR officer** is up for reelection this year. The PR office is responsible for:

- promoting J-Net as the foremost translation and interpreting network working between Japanese and English in the UK
- maintaining links with groups and organisations who may look to J-Net to provide skills, know-how and/or translators and interpreters
- advertising J-Net in selected publications and
- maintaining links to and from similar language-oriented organisations such as ATA and JAT.

If you're interested in raising J-Net's profile, please come forward at the AGM!

Links

Bar Convent: www.bar-convent.org.uk

Bar Convent also offers accommodation, but is unfortunately full for the weekend of the AGM.