

Nip-Wrong-O

Just how dry is Superdry's faux Japanese?

By Simon Prentis

Following on from the brief flurry of debate over Superdry's use of Japanese a few weeks back on J-Net, I have – as advertised – made it my mission to investigate further.

It wasn't long before I attracted the attention of a shop assistant who kept coming up to me and asking "Can I help you?"

First stop was a visit to my local Superdry store in the heart of Cheltenham, the brand's home territory. I was accompanied by another Japanese speaker and his wife, our token native informant, but the quest to keep a low profile while looking out for newly-minted Japanese slogans was repeatedly undermined by frequent snorts of laughter as new gems hove into view. My busy camera rather gave away the fact that I wasn't really looking for clothes to buy (unlike my friend and his wife who were at least going through the motions of pretending to try them on) so it wasn't long before I attracted the attention of a shop assistant who kept coming up to me and asking "Can I help you?" in a tone that clearly indicated he'd like me to leave the premises immediately. As I had no intention of doing so, I eventually cracked and told him what I was doing. I asked him if they knew that most of the slogans were gibberish in Japanese. "Yes," he said, "we keep getting Japanese people coming in here and laughing their heads off, so we figured something must be wrong with them..." Commendably honest, at least.

He told me that Julian Dunkerton, CEO of the Superdry juggernaut, often came into the shop – so I asked if he could pass him a message on my behalf. Suddenly, that seemed to be a bit more tricky. Apparently it'd be better if I spoke to the shop manager, Chris. Which I did – but he too was reluctant to take a personal interest, despite admitting

that he had also picked up a sense that all was not well with the Japanese slogans on their clothing. So, I was eventually palmed off to the PR department, who I phoned and explained my interest to ("I'm writing an article for a professional journal about the use of 'foreign' scripts in vernacular design..."), only to be invited to embark on an email correspondence. I'm still awaiting a response to my written inquiry, but with the Bulletin deadline looming, I thought I'd at least share some of the fruits of my survey of the current Superdry slogans, mixed in with some mild speculation about what might be going on.

First up, a new one to me:



Well, at least this is relatively straightforward. You can almost guess what they mean, and the sentiment itself is vaguely reminiscent of the "For beautiful human life" school of bad Japlish advertising copy. It's just that – well, clearly no native speakers were put at risk in the production of this snappy little number. But unlike some of the other items, this one does at least look as if it might be the result of running an English slogan through Google Translate, even if the 「財」 is a bit of a mystery.

Next up, another one I'd not seen before:



Astonishingly, this would seem to be not only correct, but even quite appropriate – if rather dated as a statement, to say nothing of the irony. I asked if this was a new product, but apparently it's been around for “a while”.

This next one, despite the conceptual redundancy in both English and Japanese (don't all predators hunt?) is perhaps a covert message about corporate strategy:



Moving right along: a sporting theme inspired by the Olympics, no doubt – although it would seem to be peaking a bit early for the 2020 Tokyo market. Still, harmless enough, and notionally correct.



On the same tack, if from a rather different angle, comes this:



Let's not begrudge them the dodgy particle.

Things get a little more tangled up with the next item, though, where the order of the characters are mixed up in an attempt to reprise the 「極度」 theme.



Whoops! Well, at least they're all written correctly.

Unlike this one, which seems to have been subjected to multiple photocopier distress:



The jumbled order is still with us in the next one, even if it's not quite clear which part is in the wrong order, given that it could also be read right to left:



That question is partially answered by the automotive theme of the next item:



Vehicular liquids are clearly on someone's mind, as this one also proves:



Probably best not to try drying gasoline, of course. Next up, a leap into the unknown:



I have absolutely no idea what that means. It's possibly meant to be Chinese, but then again...

More confusing still is the legend on their in-store display racks:



Even allowing that the 「ネ」 hen appears to have undergone a process of severe continental drift from its original mooring on the left side of 「神」 it's still gobbledegook. Presumably at some stage it was intended to be 'Tokyo spirit' (another unconscious link to petrol and/or lubricants?) but, well, who knows.

The classic of this genre has to be this, however:



Legibility is not improved by the poor focus of the photo, for which I apologise, but even so, it's hard to tell what's happened here. It sort of looks like it's started out in the direction of 「昔の星占い」 (whatever the implications of that) and got lost somewhere along the way. But again, who knows.

I have, of course, saved the best for last. Here's the Superdry 'original' T-shirt:



Close, so close – they've almost got it right, if only they hadn't decided to have it proofread and typeset by someone wholly illiterate in Japanese. But then, what's a few 「濁点」 between friends? I mean, ORIGINAL looks pretty much like ORIGINAL. Just

that it doesn't mean anything at all... just like the messed up katakana.

And finally, the *pièce de résistance*:



This is truly fantastic, and offers the best clue yet as to what might be at work behind the apparent madness. I think we can all agree that this is not the product of a machine translation. Nor is it anything that a human being with even the most basic fluency in Japanese could have devised. And yet, there's a clear intention here. This is not random stuff. A non-Japanese-enabled somebody appears to have been playing with the katakana tool-kit and decided to come up with their own best shot based on what they think it ought to be, rather like the unfortunate effect created by the non-English-enabled somebody who produced this classic T-shirt:



「スペルドリ」 is what you might well come up with for 'Superdry' if you had no idea how katakana is actually pronounced, but had a Japanese syllabary to hand, an overactive ego and limited imagination. SU – okay, got that one. Oh, there's a PE here, stick that in. No R? Let's try RU. No D either, so let's make it DO and RI is pretty much the same thing as RY, isn't

it? Yeah, that'll do. Crap your hand. The sound of Superdry: the Spell Dolly.

But it's the sound of money too: whatever we may think about what Wikipedia refers to rather coyly as the "Japanese-inspired graphics", Superdry product walks off the shelves in vast quantities, despite eye-watering prices (eg £22.99 for the 「スペルドリ」 T-shirt). With over 500 stores in some 40 countries – with the notable exception of Japan, though they do have outlets in Mitsukoshi stores in Taiwan – it's not surprising that their CEO has made The Times Rich List. So the £180 million question (the sum Mr Dunkerton has apparently personally banked from the business) is this: is it in fact all a black joke, a subtle piece of revenge for the bad English plastered all over T-shirts and other consumer items posted on www.english.com that we've all sniggered over so smugly for years? I suspect it is not, any more than Crap Your Hands is supposed to be funny. In fact, my best guess is that it is coming from exactly the same place, the wish to tap into that ever-present human desire to buy into something vaguely suggestive of the aspirational. It doesn't matter that it isn't quite right, because the target audience will never know. As long as it looks the part, it does the job. Bad English on Japanese clothing (and that of most other non-English-speaking countries) is all about that. But as the tectonic plates of world power start to shift, so does the axis of cool. Superdry is the sartorial equivalent of Wagamama or Yo Sushi, a sort of user-friendly Japanesey/Chinesey melange that says you're cool just by going there, even though you aren't because you've just paid too much for something that wasn't really very good in the first place.

English or Nipwringo, it makes no difference. In the end it's just great marketing, and the ones who are laughing all the way to the bank are them – not us poor professional purists, busy spluttering into our cups...

PS For anyone looking for more examples of Superdry's discombobulant Japanese design distortions, this blog provides plenty of supplementary fodder:

<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/kennytata/e/a7c21941f291187ae961cf66447ce0bc>

Disclaimer: No SuperDry clothing was harmed during the writing of this piece. All cropping was done by digital magic.