The Impact of Cultural and Technological Shifts on English Texts Related to Cultural Heritage

Rebekah Harmon[†]

† WritingWise

Keywords: translation, technology, museums

英語圏の文化財の解説における技術的・文化的変化が及ぼす影響について

Rebekah Harmon[†]

† WritingWise

キーワード：翻訳、技術、博物館

Introduction

Museums and academics have published a wealth of resources concerning best practices for museum label writing in English. While this is useful on a practical level, language and culture are always changing, and the idea of what makes a good label has evolved as well. Despite this, very few publications describe how English-language usage and terminology in museum texts have changed over time. This article is a small step toward filling that gap with a particular emphasis on changes relevant to Japanese-to-English translation. In the interest of space, the scope of this article is limited to a few key shifts spurred by diversifying social discourses and the impact of new technologies. To better elucidate these shifts, the first part of this article presents a brief overview of how early museum labels developed.

1 Early Public Museums and Labels

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, museum labels were mostly written for social elites (Shaffer, 2017). Visitors were expected to be knowledgeable about the objects, and descriptions were not lengthy. As a case in point, a catalogue from the Musée du Luxembourg in 1774 simply lists the name of the artist, the painting,

the dimensions, and the subject of the painting (McClellan, 1988).

The early twentieth century brought improved literacy rates and greater interest in educating the general public (Ingleby, 2020). In 1903, a conference was held in Mannheim, Germany, entitled "Museums as Places of Popular Culture." A published synopsis of the conference states its objective was "to discuss in what ways museums could bring themselves into touch with the working class" (p. 610). At the conference, a German curator recommends writing museum labels that resemble textbook entries. This seems to have been part of a larger trend, as by the mid-twentieth century, most museums in the US and Europe had adopted text-book-like labels authored by academics.

2 The Diversification of Social Discourses

These textbook-style labels came under criticism during the 1970s. While museums generally agreed that it was good to provide ample information, existing labels were filled with technical jargon, were difficult for visitors to understand, and were, in many cases, habitually ignored (Fragomeni, 2010). Shorter, more direct labels began to appear (Serrell, 1996), with demands for more conversational tones arising in the 1980s (McManus, 1989; Ravelli, 1996).

At the same time, feminist theory and postcolonial theory were gaining traction in academic circles, and scholars started to criticize museums for displaying texts that presented subjective or even controversial interpretations of history in an authoritative, fact-like manner (Vergo, 1989). Audiences began to demand that subjective statements be supported by evidence. This extended to value judgements on objects as well. If a curator said an object was "good" or a "masterpiece," they now needed to include statements supporting that judgement (Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation, 2010).

Changes arising from feminist theory included calls for neutral language in titles and descriptions of artworks, regardless of whether they depicted men or women. This included moving away from androcentric language that described women in terms of their relationships to men (e.g., "wife of") rather than a woman's name, or nouns that implied a male gaze (e.g., "portrait of a beauty") rather than neutral nouns (Clover et al., 2018; Machin, 2008).

Likewise, postcolonial critiques coupled with more recent changes in the international normative framework surrounding minorities and Indigenous peoples have also impacted cultural heritage institutions in manifold ways, including the terms they use (Coxall, 2000). For example, several European institutions

removed the word "ethnography" from their names and replaced it with "world cultures" or simply "cultures" from the 1990s to 2010s. One reason given for this change was to overcome the "traditional dualism of Self/Other assumed within the concept of ethnography" (Pagani, 2017).

In another example, the Minneapolis Institute of Art's policy on texts now includes the following clause:

> *When identifying objects, ideals, materials, and so on, we will. . . seek non-Eurocentric terms to replace such labels as "pre-Columbian" and "Oriental"* (Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation, 2010, p. 8).

And in the Netherlands, the Tropenmuseum recently published a guide on English terminology that recommends avoiding region-specific terms like "Western," that mean different things to different people, and instead suggests being as specific as possible when referring to countries or groups (Tropenmuseum, 2021, p. 143). An interesting philological exercise in this regard is to examine the different definitions provided for the word "*seiyō*" in a Japanese dictionary and the word "West" in an English dictionary.

Though this article's discussion of cultural shifts ends here, numerous other cultural developments are likely to impact English going forward, such as recent movements for gender-inclusive language. In the next section, I examine technological shifts, another sphere that has distinctly altered English texts concerning cultural heritage and one which also continues to evolve.

3 Changes from Technological Advances

New technologies have revolutionized the museum experience as a whole, particularly through innovations like the first audio guide in 1952 (Shaffer, 2017) and now-pervasive interactive panels and screens. Museums have adapted their texts to accommodate technological advances as well, and digital content continues to influence the way global cultural heritage is discussed in English.

To start with a historical example, the advent of widespread photography altered the way museum catalogues were written and arranged. A 1911 catalogue from The Metropolitan Museum of Art on "pottery, porcelain and faïence" contains a few black-and-white photos and describes each piece in detail, including the colors of the clay and glazes (Pier, 1911). A catalogue on Chinese porcelain from 1974 includes more photography, but most of it is black and white. The titles and

materials' descriptions frequently mention the colors of various elements with terms like "black-painted decoration" and "painted in iron red" (Le Corbeiller, 1974). Contrast this with a catalogue on Oribe ceramics published with color photographs in 2003—virtually all the colors have been removed from the object titles, and material lines simply read "glazed stoneware," presumably because the viewer can quite clearly see the colors in the photographs (Murase, 2003). The removal of colors from object names and material lines is not limited to this case alone, but has become common practice in many English-language museums.

More recently, "viral content" has been effecting changes in the English lexicon. A good example of this is a meme that went viral around 2015 describing *kintsugi* as a philosophical stance celebrating beauty in the broken. The meme became so well known that in 2021 and 2022, Tuttle Publishing released books titled *Kintsugi* without additional explanation, simply because the term had become so widespread among crafting and DIY audiences (Uchimura et al., 2022). Terms like *sashiko* and *boro* also appear in Tuttle's published titles as a result of interest generated by internet blogs and videos related to the trend of "upcycling" old clothes.

Lastly, in the broader field of East Asian cultural heritage, the most viewed video on YouTube concerning lacquerware at the time of this writing is a video uploaded by the UK's Victoria and Albert Museum on Korean lacquerware techniques. Over the past few years in particular, Korean culture has experienced a boom on digital platforms, and there is even an English-language Wikipedia page for *najeonchilgi*, referring to lacquerware with mother-of-pearl inlay. For translators, it is worth considering how such global trends may affect the way we discuss cultural heritage in English in the future.

Conclusion

Museum texts are notoriously difficult to write (Blunden, 2006), and translating texts on cultural heritage presents unique challenges. Though brief, this article introduced a few key cultural and technological shifts that have impacted English texts in the hopes of aiding those engaged in museum writing and translation. As a closing thought, digital platforms have the power to introduce new words and cultural concepts into English with impressive speed and are already changing the way English-speakers discuss and perceive global cultural heritage. While such rapid change may be frustrating in some regards, translators and curators alike can presumably look forward to a richer English lexicon that allows for more

equitable discussions on global culture.

References

Blunden, Jennifer. (2006). Dumbing down for museum audiences—necessity or myth? *The Fine Print* 3, 27–33.

Clover, Darlene & Taber, Nancy & Sanford, Kathy. (2018). Dripping pink and blue. *Andragoška Spoznanja* [Studies in adult education and learning] 24. 11–28. *https://doi.org/10.4312/as.24.3.11-28*

Coxall, H. (2000). "Whose story is it anyway?" Language and museums. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 12, 87–100. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/40793646*

Fragomeni, D. (2010). The evolution of exhibit labels. *Faculty of Information Quarterly*, 2(1), 1–11. *https://hdl.handle.net/1807/80213*

Ingleby, Matthew. (2020, June 10). Charles Dickens and the push for literacy in Victorian Britain. *The Conversation*. *https://theconversation.com/charles-dickens-and-the-push-for-literacy-in-victorian-britain-139245*

Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation. (2010). "Interpretation at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts: Policy and practice." The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. *https://www.museum-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/mia_interpretation_museum-ed.pdf*

Le Corbeiller, Clare. (1974). *China trade porcelain: Patterns of exchange*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Machin, Rebecca. (2008). Gender representation in the natural history galleries at the Manchester Museum. *Museum and Society*, 6(1), 54–67. *https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/mas/article/view/112*

McClellan, A. L. (1988). The Musée du Louvre as revolutionary metaphor during the terror. *The Art Bulletin*, 70(2), 300–313. *https://doi.org/10.2307/3051121*

McManus, P. M. (1989). Oh, yes, they do: How museum visitors read labels and interact with exhibit texts. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 32, 174–189. *https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.1989.tb00718.x*

Murase, Miyako. (Ed.). (2003). *Turning point: Oribe and the arts of sixteenth-century Japan*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Museums as places of popular culture. (1904). *Science*, 19(485), 610–612. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/1630861*

Pagani, Camilla. (2017). Exposing the predator, recognizing the prey: New institutional strategies for a reflexive museology. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 45, 71–83. International Council of Museums. *https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.341*

Pier, Garret Chatfield. (1911). *Catalogue of the collection of pottery, porcelain and faïence.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ravelli, L. J. (1996). Making language accessible: Successful text writing for museum visitors. *Linguistics and Education*, 8(4), 367–387. *https://doi.org/10.1016/S0898-5898(96)90017-0*

Serrell, Beverly. (1996). *Exhibit labels: An interpretive approach*. Rowman Altamira.

Shaffer, William R. (2017). *Exhibition design and the evolution of museum-goer experience, 1924–2016*. [Master's thesis, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; and Parsons School of Design]. Smithsonian Research Online. *https://doi.org/10.5479/si.parsons/10088/35449*

Tropenmuseum. (2021). Words matter: An unfinished guide to word choice in the cultural sector. *https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/sites/default/files/2021-04/words_matter.pdf.pdf*

Uchimura, W., & Watts, A. (2022). *The craft of translating books about handicrafts* [Webinar]. Society of Writers, Editors, and Translators. *https://youtu.be/GHhGRgkqVLs*

Vergo, Peter. (1989). *New museology*. Reaktion Books.

Victoria and Albert Museum. (2017, July 24). *How was it made? Korean inlaid lacquer* [Video]. *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT8yXhCtfRM*