

Replicating formulaic phrases in “Automation||自動化”

“Automation||自動化¹” or Jidouka is piece of generative work by Andrew Campana is hosted on PDR Journal² which replicates the automated announcements on the Tokyo rail and subway systems. It was inspired by Nick Montfort’s generative poetry—specifically “Lede”³. Over time, the repetitive nature of the work serves to mimic the experience of listening to station announcements on the Tokyo subway system. However, the choice of the final politeness markers keeps the work from being an ignorable replica to something which draws the listener’s attention in a unique way. Despite the artist stating that the work is supposed to be poetic in nature rather than a direct representation of the station announcements, the formulaic nature of the code easily duplicates the technique used to record the audio for such announcements.

Generative text consistently runs the risk of sounding awkward unless its code is either very sophisticated or excessively simplistic. This is also the case for “Automation||自動化”. While the work’s English code oftentimes feels silly or clumsy due to the nature of its grammar—which is modeled on an awkward translate of a Japanese phrase—it is grammatically correct throughout. In the case of the English code, the framework is:

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var lede = fresh(door) + fresh(verb) + " on Platform " + fresh(linenumber) + ". Please " + fresh(order) + ". "4
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It manages to avoid issues with subject verb agreement by including the conjugated “to be” with its subject in the (door) as a phrase rather than individual words as input of the code such as “The windows are’/“The ceiling is’”. As a result, while the lines may not make sense logically, they are sound grammatically.

The local train is blooming on Platform 12. Please relax.

The last train is getting cold on Platform 24. Please investigate.

The windows are watching on Platform 19. Please give us some time.

¹ “自動化 | Automation.”

² “A (Primarily) Online Journal Featuring Fiction (Short Stories and Excerpts from Novels), Poetry, Non Fiction, and Visual Art | Printer’s Devil Review.”

³ “Lede.”

⁴ Dodson, *Tdodson/Subway_auto*.

Unfortunately, this is not so with the Japanese version of the code. This is specifically due to the use of the Japanese particle が (ga) in combination with the use of transitive verbs⁵ within the code. The Japanese code is as follows:

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var lede = fresh(linenumber) + "番線、" + fresh(door) + "が" + fresh(verb) + "。ご" + fresh(order) + "ください。"
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Campana explicitly states that he used the commonly recycled phrase “番線ドアが閉まります。ご注意ください。” (‘The doors on platform 1 are closing. Please be careful’) as a framework for the Japanese version of the work, but did not account for the greater rigidity of Japanese grammar or on the weight that particles (such as ga) hold in the Japanese language. This means that some of the generations are not just logically incorrect as in the case of the English text, but also grammatically incorrect as the particle and verb form do not match.

3 番線、トンネルが見ています。ご安心ください

2 番線、線路が聞いています。ご強力ください。

Here, it would have been better to use the particle を (o) within these phrases thus following Japanese grammar rules and making the nouns in the sentences direct objects rather than subjects. In this case, to make the work grammatically correct, it would have been better to replicate his use of subject/verb phrases in English to include particle/verb phrases in Japanese.

Interestingly, one of the announcement on major train lines is also grammatically incorrect as it serves as a hypercorrection in an attempt to maintain 敬語 (keigo)—the grammar of one of the higher levels of politeness within the Japanese language: “電車が参ります” (“Densha ga mairimasu”) or “The train is coming.”⁶ This is a commonly used and also grammatically incorrect form of “manual keigo” which is common among service workers as their companies set out a list of common phrases in the more polite version of Japanese.⁷

This is part of the perhaps accidentally genius of “Automation||自動化”. Its mistakes and awkwardness do a surprisingly good job of replicating the mistakes and awkwardness found within the actual automation of the train announcements. Creating the voice alerts on the larger

⁵ Dexter, “Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in Japanese and How To Use Them.”

⁶ “Japanese Phrases and Etiquette for Taxis, Trains, and Buses in Japan.”

⁷ Inc, “Keigo, the Complete Mess | Learn Japanese Online - Free Lessons + Makoto+ Membership.”

lines (like those found in the Tokyo trains and subways Campana was inspired by) is very similar to the template created within the code. The voice actor reads through a list of phrases separate from the terms which will be inputted into that phrase. There will be one audio recording stating “The next station is ___” and then a list of station names “Yoyogi/Urayasu/Tokyo/Ikebukuro”.⁸ Although the text-to-speech option here defaults to the user’s browser settings, the choice of subject means that the work’s audio is not as uncomfortable as that found when fluidity of speech is expected. No one expects train announcements to sound like natural language. I was able to listen to the code and begin to ignore it in the same way I would ignore announcements while commuting to and from work and living in Tokyo. The weird, pseudo-English becomes background noise that you shrug off when you are inundated daily with a variety of awkwardly translated phrases. Though, occasionally, one would be so jarringly strange that I would laugh out loud. Particularly memorable were:

The last train is listening on Platform 12. Please give it back.

The ceiling is floating on Platform 17. Please question this.

The subway is getting cold on Platform 31. Please forgive us.

While “Automation||自動化” would have benefitted from including the ambient train sounds that initially run when the page is loaded under the spoken audio, the choice to have a text-to-speech function means that the work is more immersive than reading through the generated text and allowed for the overall experience to be replicated in a way which I was not expecting.

“Automation||自動化”, though it has some faults, does a surprisingly good job of replicating both the Japanese and English announcements of the Tokyo train line audio prompts. Even though the artist statement claims that the piece is reminiscent of poetry, it serves better as an example of absurdist reproduction of an automated system. This is especially true given the context of the original inspiration; hypercorrected Japanese and poorly translated English versions of that source text.

⁸ Ando, Announcement Creation Process.

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