

## Fire station's English woes worth worry

April 28, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

For a number of years, I have had a soft spot in my heart for the city of Keelung. That's because my former secretary Amy comes from Keelung, and I've greatly enjoyed visits with her family there. Now I have another reason to like the place.

The Keelung Fire Department recently discovered ridiculously inept Chinese-English translations on several signs within its newly renovated Jhong Shan branch, and administrators say that regardless of mixed opinions about the seriousness of the problem, the bad language has to go (CP 4-21-13 p. 11). Three cheers from my corner on this one.

How bummed-up (a useful slang expression) were the translations? Well, originally "Small captain Room" was to appear on one door inside the new fire department building. The first thing that comes to my mind here is a kindergarten. Authorities at a kindergarten are separating little boys from little girls for some reason (am I right?), and the boys go to the "captain Room," while the girls go, ah, to the "Small princess Room"?

If you are reading these lines with care you'll also note the error with capitalization. Two of the words are capitalized, but the middle one is not. Why? Details matter. Let's capitalize every letter there. This is language on a sign, after all.

Reportedly, the proposed solution to "Small captain Room" is "Squad Leader Office." Well, that makes sense. Fire brigades have squads, and squads have leaders. Also, the "caps" on the words are uniform now.

According to The China Post, "Female Personnel Standby Room" is the repaired rendering for the previously hilarious and intriguing "Female Players Bedroom." Whew. For some reason I don't want to touch that one. But (sigh), is this the best we can do? Stand by for what? Aren't those words that astronauts prepare for years to hear? "Roger, Apollo I. Stand by for take-off!"

Can you imagine spending \$NT 80 million dollars to renovate an important public building, and allowing English such as this to appear on public signs inside it?

The clincher in the news article refers not so much to the question of battered language, but to the reactions of some of the fire fighters, who were "split over the translations." Some feared the original translations "might mislead foreigners," and some were of the opinion "the mistakes would not affect the brigade's efficiency." The logic behind the latter phrasing outstrips the question of the quality of language. It is difficult to imagine how their abilities in the English language could in any way affect the valor or efficiency of the noble fire-fighters of Keelung.

This little news report, seemingly about a rather inconsequential problem, is actually loaded with bones to chew on. Concern for the poor quality of Chinese-English translation on a few door signs may seem misplaced, given the gravity of so many recent news events. For thousands of us who teach English in Taiwan, however, a story like this highlights facts that we confront nearly every day.

The first fact is that language matters. How we speak (and, presumably, how we write) says a lot about ourselves. One of the key traits of someone's personality is how he or she uses language. The language we use, to some degree, represents us. It reveals our values, sensitivities, background, interests, and so many other truths about us.

The question of mediocre English on signs in Keelung's new Jhong Shan Fire Department is not at all a silly question. Those signs are living proof of how the people of Keelung, and particularly the fire-fighting personnel who use that building, respect themselves and the impact they have on others.

Sometimes I feel like Don Quixote chasing windmills as I urge students to develop an eye for detail. Now, I am not saying I myself am a Nobel Prize winner for Eye for Detail. (I make goofs aplenty, and regret every last one.) I am saying that details in language matter, and may matter a great deal.

Thanks to our fire-fighters in Keelung and the translation problems they've found for signs on doors. This news story sparks thoughts on a topic that is perhaps worth further exploration in the future. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

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