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Fear and Risk

Translating 恐れ and 心配



Mike Berry
QA manager

1 Introduction

In this Technical English Note, I'm going to discuss fear and risk¹. I'm not going to write about the near-meltdown the world economy suffered in the last 2 years, or about new types of influenza, volcanic eruptions or other disasters.

Actually, I'm going to write briefly about these two words themselves, *fear* and *risk*, as they occur in patent literature. They are a prime example of words that are very common in Japanese patents, but which do not always translate well directly into English.

The good news is that the problems we will discuss here are not major problems. However, following these guidelines and hints can help your technical writing to sound more natural.

...see next page

¹ Although this is described as a 'basic course' in the page header, this note also contains hints and information of a more advanced level.

2 Nervous? Worried?

a) *Fear and risk*

As mentioned before, this note is really about the Japanese words

心配 (*shinpai*, meaning fear, worry, risk) or
恐れ (*osore*, meaning fear, dread, anxiety, risk)

They are used in Japanese patents to express a situation where there is some undesirable situation, and are commonly translated as *fear*.

Whereas in Japanese these are probably the most common words used, *fear* is usually used with a stronger emotional meaning in English, and not so suitable in technical English. For example, take the example sentence as a literal translation from Japanese:

“When starting the controller, there is a *fear* that the voltage will drop below the threshold value V_t ”

This is of course perfectly understandable to an examiner or engineer. However, it is a little too strong. Imagine watching a movie, when you know something shocking is going to happen. An example is just before someone is attacked by sharks, monsters, pirates or whatever, and you know something bad will happen because there is always creepy background music just before the scary part. That's *fear*.

Fortunately, a remedy for this stressful situation is available:

“When starting the controller, there is a *risk* that the voltage will drop below the threshold value V_t ”

Risk is a useful word because it basically says “something bad could happen” but without the emotional feeling.

If you want an even less scary word, you could use *possibility*. The only slight problem is that *possibility* does not necessarily imply anything negative could happen. The effect, this time, might be slightly too weak, as though the voltage drop is basically normal.

“When starting the controller, there is a *possibility* that the voltage will drop below the threshold value V_t ”

b) *fear* and *concern*

The example in the previous section was a very neutral example in an emotional sense. There was no person directly involved, and hence no-one was truly scared. However, let's consider a situation where there is a person involved, and they do feel – just very slightly – worried.

Imagine it's a cold day, and you're driving along a road. There's ice on the road, and you don't want your car to skid and crash. Fortunately, your car has anti-lock and anti-skid braking. There is a warning feature that tells you if the car detects ice on the road (maybe it flashes a blue light or sounds a warning tone).

“The anti-skid alarm provides an early warning to the driver, reducing the *fear* felt by the driver due to the road conditions”

Again, fear is a little too strong. As an alternative, try this:

“The anti-skid alarm provides an early warning to the driver, reducing the *concern* felt by the driver due to the road conditions”

In addition, a useful method is to rephrase the sentence to concentrate on actions, not emotions:

“The anti-skid alarm provides an early warning to the driver, reducing the load on the driver due to the road conditions”

“The anti-skid alarm provides an early warning to the driver, enabling him or her to adapt driving style to the road conditions”

c) *possibility* and *probability*

Finally, a quick word on these 2 quite similar words. While they are often translated from the same Japanese word, they are subtly different. They are different in 2 ways

probability often sounds like a number, for example 0.35 or 35%.

probability is stronger (more likely) than *possibility*. If something is more than 50% likely to happen, maybe you want to use *probability*. However, *risk* or *high probability* are often more natural. If you don't know which is more likely, and just want to say “it could happen”, then you will normally use *possibility*.

possibility is not numeric. Probability is usually a value. You can have a probability of 25% or 0.25, but not a ~~possibility of 0.25~~. Likewise, using quantifier-type expressions, you could say there is a “high probability” of something happening, but not a “~~high possibility~~”. (You could use strong possibility because it is not a numeric-sounding expression).