

## MANAGING JAPANESE LOCALIZATION PROJECTS

*Both measurable and intangible elements  
affect the outcome of Japanese localization*

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It is generally taken as common knowledge that Japanese localization is different — it takes more time, involves more steps and costs more than other languages. Japanese is also frequently considered to be the most difficult — and expensive — language to localize into, but it does not always need to be this way. With some precautions in mind, localizing into Japanese can be a smooth process. So what makes for a successful Japanese localization project?

### COMPONENTS OF SUCCESS

The key success components of a typical localization project normally include factors such as quality, schedule, cost or communication. For Japanese projects, all the usual rules for project success apply, but in addition, Japanese clients normally expect that their vendors share their business values. While most of the other success components involve an element of measurability and therefore objectivity, business values are intangible and hence less apparent.

For those of us who are non-Japanese, an understanding of the practical application of Japanese business values is further complicated by the fact that we often need to guess at them. This is attributable, at least partly, to the inherent preference of the

Japanese people for the concept of *wa* (literally meaning *peace*), of maintaining a peace and harmony rather than a candid exchange of opinions, arguments or confrontation. *Wa*, often considered to be the most important of Japanese values, is a concept that baseball fans might know from the popular book *You Gotta Have Wa* by Robert Whiting, in which the author pictures the landscape of Japanese baseball and what it takes for expatriate players to succeed there. In a business context, *wa* may prevent an unprepared non-Japanese from finding or exploring the root cause of a problem or an issue.

### WHY SHOULD JAPANESE LOCALIZATION BE MORE DIFFICULT?

The most common issues are that Japanese clients are considered to be very demanding — with high requirements for quality — and that project costs and schedules are worse than for other languages. For many North American or European companies, working with Japanese clients requires extra efforts to satisfy their requirements, which would often go far beyond those of other languages. But this is, of course, not unique to localization.

The general level of just about any service in Japan might be considered as extremely high by most standards, and this is what Japanese

customers, or consumers, expect. One only needs to enter any Japanese shop and enjoy the extreme politeness of shop assistants and their care and maximum effort to please you to understand this. Localization makes the differences more striking because by definition it involves crossing between cultures and languages.

The key issues to do with Japanese localization can be classified as being linguistic — to do with language and the localization process — and human/ cultural — associated with relationship expectations and the values of clients and vendors. The Japanese language poses unique technical issues that change the linguistic and engineering process relative to European languages — even relative to a number of, if not most, other Asian languages. But human issues — cultural or business value issues — have a much larger impact on managing Japanese projects.

### LINGUISTIC ISSUES

Some of the key Japanese linguistic issues might include the following:

**High degree of subjectivity.** What makes the Japanese language more complex is the high variability of vocabulary and of “spelling.” Here, the use of different writing systems comes into

play: kanji, encompassing more than 2,000 ideographic Chinese characters, most of which can be read in multiple ways (at least two, while some characters have more than ten various pronunciations), is used concurrently with the two phonetic systems — hiragana and katakana, collectively known as kana. Another system is romaji, used in specific situations for writing Japanese with the Latin alphabet. Romaji is also the system used most frequently for typing Japanese on computers, with the characters typed then being converted by software (input method editors — IME) to kanji, hiragana or katakana. This system (also known as keyboard romaji) has now prevailed over the still largely supported direct kana input method. However, in addition to writing, cultural differences may complicate word choice.

For example, ユーザー vs. ユーザ (katakana) vs. 使用者 (kanji) vs. 利用者 (kanji) — all of these expressions mean *user*, and their specific usage depends on the context, the company policy or the culture of the organization and also on the expected target audience. The current trends are towards using the more phonetic kana words, and kana is increasingly replacing kanji in many types of Japanese writing, especially the popular or modern forms. Software and product documentation would fall under this category.

**Highly variable styles.** The Japanese language is changing quickly, as is Japanese society in general. At the same time, language standards related to “spelling” or transliteration are not centrally controlled. This is different from some other languages, such as French, where one of the goals of the Académie Française is to protect, preserve and police the French language. Or from German, with the recent rather radical and still controversial spelling reform — *Rechtschreibreform*, which is currently still being implemented in most German-speaking countries in Europe. Styles are also generation specific. In general, the current generations prefer phonetic katakana to character-based kanji, while older generations may sometimes literally not understand modern katakana terminology.

For example, 以下を参照してください。 vs. 以下を参照ください。 vs. 以下を参照して下さい。 vs. 以下を参照下さい。 All of these are different stylistic variations meaning *Please refer to the following*, and their usage is situational. The correct expression will always depend on who is

### Common Difficulties in Japanese Localization

- Quality
  - Error rate is high
  - Many linguistic issues are subjective
  - Aesthetic quality of localized content considered insufficient for Japanese market
- Schedule
  - Translation takes longer than planned
  - Technical work takes longer than planned
  - More client review cycles than planned — more rework
- Cost
  - Increased scope cannot be recovered from client
- Perception/Relationship
  - Vendor not sure if relationship is healthy
  - Personality and cultural communication problems

being addressed. There are a high number of polite expressions with minute nuances of politeness and formality. Invariably, it is crucial to understand the whole context and situation in which the expression is being used, and only then is it possible to choose the most appropriate equivalent.

**Grammar.** Japanese has remained one of the few *strictly* agglutinative languages, in which individual affixes (an affix is something that is attached, for instance, to a root word to change its meaning) specify aspects such as tense, plural and politeness and whether the sentence is negative, passive, causative or a question. Such affixes do not merge with the words which precede them and do not change their form. This sets the Japanese language apart not only from the Indo-European languages but also from Chinese, where meaning is determined by word order, as in English. The basic word order in Japanese is subject-object-verb (SOV) (for example, *Jim files translates*), while Chinese or English would predominantly follow the subject-verb-object model (SVO) (*Jim translates files*). What Japanese and Chinese have in common, however, is that they are both topic-prominent languages, where the basic sentence structure is topic-comment — topic is the thing talked about and comment is what is being said about it — and the topic is systematically indicated as separate from the subject.

For example, Please *enter* your password.  
パスワードを入力してください。

Your password (object) / *enter* / please.

One major effect of this issue is the need for translators to restructure Japanese sentences and

also frequently to add appropriate words to arrive at the proper translation. Another is the transpositions of translation memory (TM) segments or a disruption of DTP formatting.

**Context-dependent reading.** The reading of a given character, too, depends on its context. For instance, the character 翻 has two basic readings, while others may have more.

翻訳 *honnyaku* (*translate, translation*)

翻す *hirugaesu* (*turn over, reverse*)

翻る *hirugaeru* (*wave, flutter, flap*)

An immediate effect of this context-dependent reading is that translators have to think carefully about which is the most appropriate translation. Another effect is on sorting where, as a result, a native Japanese speaker must manually index characters by considering their reading in order to arrive at the correct table of contents, index or sorted lists.

Remembering the exact reading of some character combinations is by no means automatic because to understand a written text one does not necessarily need to know the reading.

### HUMAN CONSIDERATIONS

It is equally important to be aware of the human requirements associated with Japanese localization.

Language, in general, can be considered the face of a person, as it is the face of an organization in case of corporate content and products. Presentation is in many cases more important than substance. The universally high quality of Japanese printed materials and packaging is a direct result of this preference.

This means that good documentation is valued highly, and there is a very low tolerance of cosmetic defects. It also means that the graphical layout and presentation of source materials may be regarded as insufficient, inappropriate or, in the worst case, confusing for Japanese users. The general focus is on aesthetically appealing design and one that prefers graphics and pictures instead of — or at the expense of — long descriptive texts.

This is not unrelated to the fact that Japanese kanji characters are themselves like pictures — every kanji character has a meaning, and it carries an aesthetic quality. Consider manga, which is so hugely popular in Japan, and it is easier to understand the preference for the visual rather than the textual. The Japanese will normally expect explanations done by using illustrations or pictures that will guide them through a given process or product.

HOW TO SUCCEED

While the list of important considerations to keep in mind when localizing into Japanese could be much longer, there are some recommendations or best practices which when followed may help address some of the complexities.

**Shared business values.** According to Geoff Wing, consultant and frequent speaker on Japanese business and cultural issues, in order to succeed it is important for suppliers to share the same business values as their customers. Suppliers should expect that aesthetic and subjective issues are important and should understand the Japanese expectations of vendor service. These include being a very responsive, flexible vendor who is thorough and detail oriented. The Japanese will, in general, prefer a face-to-face discussion to decide important matters. However, it may take more than two or three meetings to understand the honest opinion of the other party. Face-to-face communication is also expected to happen with technical staff, and regular client visits to the client site are routine. Allow for access to the vendor's executive staff.

**Art versus compliance.** Japanese clients and suppliers tend to regard themselves as craftsmen. Wing observes that oftentimes the product receives all the attention of an artistic masterpiece. Service providers who fail to buy into this perfection-driven mindset or who fail to show their dedication to it are simply driven out of the vendor-client relationship. The Japanese language is something like an art itself, so companies driven merely by compliance to specifications will not succeed. Suppliers must also follow the spirit of specifications, delivering more than just what was asked for. These are the subjective requirements of Japanese business.

**Early involvement.** Because the Japanese language is so subjective and because the appearance of documentation is important, it is advisable to build in an early client or reviewer involvement in the preparation phases of the project. This may mean, for instance, an early freezing of a glossary or sampling of early translations. It is useful to ensure that the client reviewer has a defined authority because it is possible that other persons may step in later and override his or her potentially subjective preferences.


**Attention to format requirements.** It is important to take into account the different expectations of Japanese end users in terms of the cosmetic aspects of layout and the general pursuit of "beautiful layouts" appealing to readers. Getting an early approval of DTP specifications will save time later. Applying the original source-language DTP specifications might not suffice for Japanese clients and may have a negative impact on the ultimate acceptance of the localized product or documentation.

**Review cycles.** The number of review cycles tends to be high for some Japanese clients. This could be because reviewer requirements change mid-project or because they are not defined precisely from the outset. It is a good practice to anticipate this in scheduling and planning, and to work with the client actively to reduce the amount of extra work or rework required. In practice this means the need to always schedule time for glossary and style guide creation and review. With new clients, an even higher number of review cycles should be anticipated.

**Agree on policies and anticipate time and costs specific to Japanese.** The general solution and recommendation for suppliers are to agree up front on the rules of engagement and policies to do with managing mutual expectations and managing changes. Time needs to be allocated to allow for the specific steps of Japanese localization processes or aspects of the Japanese language such as context-dependent reading, grammar structures or manual sorting. These will result in lower productivities, on average, than on other languages.

**Work hard and expect the same.** While European or North American localization companies may sometimes be surprised by apparently excessive demands from Japanese clients, they might also be surprised by the long hours and strong work ethic of Japanese vendors. Japanese clients are demanding, but Japanese service providers work very hard to meet the requirements of their clients.

LOCALIZE THE LOCALIZATION PROCESS

It is safe to say that successful management of Japanese localization projects requires more than do projects into other languages. Above all, success requires a "localization" not only of the localization process, but also of the overall approach, and the sharing of the clients' business values. 

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