



A viaLanguage White Paper

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English-to-Japanese Translation

Cultural implications on quality

An Executive Overview

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The Challenge of Localizing Content for the Japanese Market

Extending sales of products and services into the Japanese market has proven to be a profitable strategy for many companies. Indeed, in many cases Japan serves as the cornerstone or “jumping off” point for many companies eying to gain a foothold in Asia. Yet with so many market opportunities and such a well-trodden path to this new market, why do Japanese language translation issues continue to cause so many headaches for international companies? Many perplexed clients have asked themselves that same question. Although their localization efforts for languages such as French, Spanish, German, Chinese and Korean seem to go well, Japanese is typically fraught with issues. They are not alone. For many reasons the Japanese language is simply a more difficult target language than most others. But with the proper preparation and implementation, you can navigate the potential challenges and pitfalls of translating into Japanese—and viaLanguage can help. Taking it one step at a time, and following some basic rules, Japanese translations can be less daunting and more effective.

Step One: Collaboration

Apart from finding the right translators—which we’ll discuss next—many potential issues can be diffused early by simply establishing effective communication between the Japanese office/distributor and the localization team. Remember that the Japanese culture is, by nature, highly collaborative and quality conscious. For instance, Japanese staff will typically choose to work overtime—on their own time—to “get it right.” Accuracy can not be rushed. Corporate team members might also reject paid vacation time since they feel a responsibility to stay and support coworkers who are still working. National, regional, and even corporate pride takes priority over personal agendas. Team commitment and dedication to quality and precision are hallmarks of the Japanese culture. Thus, collaboration and inclusion with your translation team—whether an agency or not—is extremely important.

Managing the In-Country Review

- **The Kickoff Meeting** – A great starting point, and a good venue for sharing background and credentials among the team. It’s also a good time to exchange contact information, discuss project scope and deadlines, as well as the preferred review process. Your project manager should be able to facilitate this call with you, your in-country review team and the lead translator.
- **Glossary and Style Guide** – Before the translation project begins, ensure that the style guide and/or glossary have been developed, and are ready for review and approval by the local office/distributor. In order to avoid potential disconnects, it’s important to get the input and approval on the glossary and style guide issues.
- **Early Check-Ins** – If possible, appoint a lead in-country reviewer to review and approve an early sample of the translation. This ensures that the reviewer’s style is incorporated into the work and that there are no surprises at the end of the project. Consider padding the exchange with an extra couple days. Reviewers often have a

different full-time job within the company and are not always able to meet tight deadlines.

- **Build-in Some Slack** – Build in collaboration time between the lead-translator and lead-reviewer for clarification on terms and comments. Also, make sure to include the project manager on all points of detail.
- **Details, Details** – Japanese customers will scrutinize subjective stylistic issues very closely. Knowing this, your in-country reviewer will not take this aspect of the translation lightly either. Plan ahead and set reviewer expectations properly when it comes to the nature and relevance of stylistic differences.

Step Two: Respect the Language-Culture Connection

The Japanese have long endured problems with translations prepared by native English speakers or by Japanese translators that live abroad, and have thus adopted some degree of English language structure and organization. This makes finding an appropriate and competent translator essential. Also, several known language concerns should be addressed up front by your agency and the lead in-country reviewer, and should be documented as a part of the style guide.

- Japanese communication is famously “high-context.” High-context readers have a need to sense the age, background, and social/professional status of the writer. There is also the expectation that all parties engaged in a discussion are already familiar with the history leading up to the conversation. A good Japanese localization will also take into consideration the expected inclusion of various indirect communication cues...such as the use of purposely-vague expressions in order to avoid culturally-inappropriate confrontations.
- Japanese words and expressions can be gender-specific or gender-neutral. For instance, there are words that mean “self” that have specific gender, formality, and even regional meanings. There are also simple ways to refer to oneself in a gender-neutral tone, which can be used by either gender interchangeably. The obvious problem here is that these words can potentially lose the connection to the context and become the same generic word or term as that used in the English source. Thus, a literal translation will lose the intended effect and could even seem insulting.
- Frequently, language concerns amount to differences over the translation of specific jargon. Compared with other markets, a lot of technical and industrial terms have extremely dissimilar translations from company to company. Glossary development is vital.
- More so than in most cultures, detail and accuracy are a vital part of the cultural equation in Japan. Not only from a readability standpoint, but as a component of the brand. Some translation elements that may seem unimportant in some cultures are scrutinized closely in Japan—and by Japanese clients. For instance the role that context plays in Japanese communications means that a Japanese translation should be sensitive to images and visual cues that connote formality or seriousness. Bolding, underlining, stylized character sets, etc. should be used sparingly since packaging is a very important component of the brand for most Japanese, and the overuse of style elements will only make the communication less effective overall.

- Understanding what these differences are and showing sensitivity to those elements will result in a more effective Japanese translation. That sensitivity will also help to allay the fear of missing context information or inexact formatting reflecting poorly on the product.
- Japanese technical and procedural manuals tend to be more detailed and lengthy than what you might see published by US or European companies. In many cases, the volume of documentation also reflects on the brand, and more tends to be better. Users will notice if documentation seems scarce.
- In Japanese communications, it is normal practice to employ more charts, drawings and figures to supplement and help explain technical descriptions.

Step Three: Understand the Display Challenges.

There are a host of technical issues that cannot be overlooked when localizing content for Japanese especially, related to websites and software applications. Context and social distance issues that are relevant in the Japanese culture overall can also manifest themselves in the user experience expectations that users of a Japanese site will have. The character set can present challenges when it comes to correctly displaying text. An entirely different set of database attributes are required to accommodate the dynamic database-driven content sites that are the norm in today's Internet world. For example, the database behind the website might need to be modified to support the Unicode character set, and if the website uses the Shift-JIS character set, a conversion will be needed.

Font Size & Style

Japanese script is more finely-detailed than roman script letters, and the subtle nuance of the strokes that make up a character have to be seen on the screen. Therefore more screen real estate—and design time—needs to be devoted to larger characters. This can be problematic in cases where insufficient space has been allotted in a layout designed only with English text in mind. The use of font styles that may lend emphasis to English text doesn't deliver the same affect when applied to Japanese script. For instance, italicized Japanese script would just seem confusing to most Japanese readers. A more-accepted practice is to employ additional punctuation marks or double-width characters to convey importance or impart respect.

Line Breaks, Spacing & Vertical Text

Although a stream of English text may be broken on nearly any space, the same can't be said of Japanese text. Japanese Characters cannot be broken as randomly as can English sentences. Your desktop publishing (DTP) specialists need to be aware of this and work closely with the translator to ensure that the format of the translated page is appropriate. So, while DTP or graphic editing specialists unfamiliar with a specific European language can still accurately format documents in that language, character-based languages such as Japanese present a different set of challenges. In order to accurately format Japanese text an additional process is required—unless only native operators are used. Also, in many marketing materials, titles are placed vertically rather than horizontally to convey importance in the overall layout.

Choose Your Translation Partner Wisely

Of course, understanding the cultural challenges related to quality Japanese translation is only part of the solution. Selecting the right translation partner—one that puts a priority on the cultural component of accurate translations—is also important. The need and demand for translation services is greater than ever before and, and as the world economy becomes more tightly integrated, the importance of top quality translations will only continue to grow. And, as industries and cultures continue to move closer together market forces will require that translations are not merely accurate and complete, but culturally appropriate as well.

As a full-service language service provider, viaLanguage has the right team, the right tools, and all the resources necessary to process your translation and localization jobs efficiently and cost-effectively—regardless of your project’s size or complexity. viaLanguage’s combination of expertise across the spectrum of content types and a proven translation methodology ensures that your multicultural communications are in good hands. Our superior technology tools, along with a full range of value-added services, work together to provide you with accurate translations that are delivered on-time or early 99% of the time, with strict quality assurance checkpoints at each step along the way.

Take the Next Step

To learn more about how viaLanguage can help you cost-effectively reach your international customers, call us at 1-800-737-8481 or create your free account at www.vialanguage.com.