Region Focus

Gender differences in Japanese localization

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The Orient is often referred to as an area with an air of inscrutability, and perhaps one of the foremost reasons for this is its languages. With many intricate characters and myriad meanings gleaned from seemingly cryptic glyphs, the languages of Asia are easily perceived as alien, complicated systems. Japanese is often regarded as one of the most complicated of modern languages because of its many components, such as its writing system with its three component scripts; its multiple word pronunciation; and its extensive use of honorifics, correct only when applied in the correct social context related to the observer's social standpoint, work relations and so on. It is a potential linguistics minefield, fraught with pitfalls stemming from the simplest of social misunderstandings. So, how best do we go about taking something made by Japanese for a Japanese audience and turn it into something applicable and enjoyable for the West and vice-versa?

Localization is the process of adapting a product or message for a particular region or country or producing a document that supports the character set of a given language, showing the correct formatting for dates, numbering, currencies, addresses and so on. Localizing marketing text involves translation but also a considerable amount of research into the product's target market, competitors and areas of concern. The localization process is much more than just pure translation.

Linguistic differences

In order to understand how gender distinctions in Japanese can affect the way in which the language functions and how it is interpreted — as well as its impact on localization — one must first look at the fundamental linguistic differences in the Japanese language.

Written Japanese is comprised of three separate systems that are employed together to form complete sentences. Japanese possesses two phonetic scripts: hiragana (ひらがな) and katakana (カタカナ), each of which consists of 46 symbols that can be modified with diacritical marks to change the sound to a separate set. The third component of written Japanese — kanji (漢字) — is Chinese characters, pictorial ideographs of the meaning that each character holds. There are around 3,000 to 5,000 kanji ideographs in use in written Japanese.

Any given sentence in Japanese could be sounded out solely using the phonetic alphabet that is hiragana, though this would likely cause consternation as the kanji characters allow for faster reading and faster interpretation of the concepts within a sentence. In modern Japanese, hiragana forms the grammar of Japanese sentences:

「これは私の教科書です」(*Kore ha watashi no kyoukasho desu*) *"This is my textbook."*

In this simple sentence, we can see two of the scripts in action. The simpler, rounded characters are hiragana, and the two more complicated characters are the Chinese kanji (私 and 教科書). The two kanji characters refer to *I/myself* and *textbook* respectively. The hiragana fits around the kanji characters, thus forming the grammar of the sentence. Katakana is mostly used for foreign loanwords and for dramatic effect:

「このゲームはやったことあるの？」 (*Kono ge-mu ha yatta koto aru no?*) *"Have you played this game before?"*

In this sentence the word *game* (ゲーム) is rendered in katakana. The shapes of the characters are often similar to their hiragana counterparts, though

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Watashi	私	Standard term for the self, gender neutral, polite
Watakushi	私	Exceptionally polite term for the self, used only in formal situations
Wagahai	我輩	Outdated term for oneself, predominantly male usage, Meiji era (1868-1912)
Sessha	拙者	Archaic form, mostly male usage, pre-Meiji era (1568-1868)
Washi	わし	Masculine form, used often by old men
Boku	僕	Informal, used by men/boys of all ages
Ore	俺	Informal, used by boys wanting to appear older
Atashi	あたし	Polite/informal, standard feminine term
Atai	あたい	Tokyo dialect version of *Atashi*

Table 1: Examples of the numerous ways to speak of oneself in Japanese.

they are much sharper and more angular — hence, their use in advertising because they are seen to be more dynamic, standing out much more than the commonplace hiragana.

In modern Japanese, the three systems are combined together, and the usage of all three is gender neutral to a certain extent. But this was not always the case. When Japanese as a written language was first established, it was only the men who wrote. Gradually as centuries passed, women started writing as well. Originally, hiragana was also known as *Onna de* (女手) or *woman's hand* and was the sole acceptable method of writing for women at the time. The soft curving characters of hiragana were deemed intrinsically more feminine than the harsh, blade-like strokes of katakana. Many young girls will make an effort to write using hiragana more than kanji, due to the cute, soft appearance that hiragana has.

Unlike English and many other languages, Japanese has a vast array of words in use to define oneself depending on the speaker's whims and personality and social appropriateness (Table 1). There are simple ways to refer to oneself in a gender-neutral tone, which can be used by both genders interchangeably. The obvious problem here is that all of these words translate to the same thing in English and many other languages. Thus, in a literal translation the effect is often lost, and more creative methods must be employed to preserve the gender-specific element.

For example, in a scene from Akira Kurosawa's film *Yojinbo* (*The Bodyguard*), 用心棒 a male gangster is suddenly faced with the guard who approaches him without notice:

Gangster (Male):「何だ、てめえは!」(*Nanda temee ha!*) *"Who are you?"*

The word「てめえ」is a strong and somewhat rude method of expressing *you* and is only used by men, especially in a fight situation or when people are involved in a conflict with each other. If we directly translate *Nanda*, it becomes "What is it?" but in this kind of scenario, it is used to emphasize the intense situation.

Here's another similar case of a woman bumping into a stranger who has suddenly approached her:

The Woman:「どなたかしら?」(*Donata kashira?*) *"Who are you?"*

Donata is a polite way of referring to or asking about the other person. It is used by both men and women depending on the situation. *Kashira* is used by women (see the discussion about sentence final particles later on). The direct translation would be "I wonder . . ." but, due to the strained atmosphere inherent in this scene, it is translated more accurately as "Who are you?"

Neutral sentence final particle (SFP)		
Da	だ	Short colloquial form
Desu	です	Standard polite term
Deshou	でしょう	Standard indication of uncertainty, polite
Yo	よ	Emphatic/informative particle
Ne	ね	Exclamation/agreement
Yo ne	よね	Emphatic agreement/affirmation
Masculine SFP		
Da	だ	Simple colloquial form, used more often by men
Darou	だろう	Indicating uncertainty, possibility
Kai	かい	Male equivalent of the question form *Ka*
Zo	ぞ	Harsh emphatic of *Yo*
Ze	ぜ	Harsh emphatic of *Yo*, often regarded as cool
Sa	さ	Indicating uncertainty, more colloquial than *Darou*
Na	な	Male affirmation
Kana	かな	I wonder. . . .
n ending	ん	Negative verb ending, *Wakaran* (分からん) "I don't understand." Women almost never use this form. Instead they use the standard negative verb ending in its short form *Wakaranai* (分からない), possibly with/without a feminine SFP.
Feminine SFP		
Wa	わ	Soft sentence ending, slightly emphatic
Wa yo	わよ	Soft agreement/affirmation/informative
Deshou	でしょう	Fundamentally neutral, though has a slight feminine nuance implied, indicates uncertainty, possibility
Kashira	かしら	I wonder. . . .

Table 2: Out of all the elements in speech that define the role of the speaker or the speaker's subject, SFPs are the most frequent.

Japanese speakers tend to favor short sentences in conversation, opting to drop references to the subject when it is thought that they will be intrinsically understood by the listener. For example, the adjective *Ureshii!* (嬉しい!) can be translated to mean anything from "I'm really glad it's turned out this way!" to "I'm so happy you have done that for me!"

The example and its translations depend upon the context of the sentence and the decisions of the translator. Similarly, what would take a small sentence or longer to communicate in another language can be as short as a single word in Japanese: *Yatta!* (やった!) or "I/we/they did it!" Obviously, this can cause problems when the localization of text is confined to a small area, and the resultant translations may be much longer than in the source language.

What would be considered an unfinished sentence in a literal rendition into English can quite often be a complete sentence in

contemporary Japanese. So, what happens when we now start introducing gender-specific phraseology?

One highly unique point of the Japanese language is the diversity of gender-specific terminology/expressions/constructs. Unlike in most Western languages, gender places certain linguistic and social limitations upon the choice of phrase or wording of the speaker. In Japanese what would be communicated in a gesture or inflection in other languages often has its own separate register and rules.

In written Japanese this normally never creates an issue, as standard speech for advertisements, newspapers and products is gender neutral. It is only when dealing with quoted speech or areas where there is a distinct emphasis placed upon the gender of the speaker that problems can occur. For instance, with the spoken word exclusively, the female tone in general has a rising intonation at the end, which in its natural lingual context comes across with a certain brightness that is not evident in the male tone, nor is it considered necessary.

One of the key methods by which Japanese speakers differentiate between genders within the language is with various different sentence final particles (SFPs). Out of all the elements in speech that define the role of the speaker or the speaker's subject, SFPs are the most frequent. There is a distinct split between gender-specific SFPs, as indicated in Table 2.

Acoustically speaking, feminine SFPs have a distinctly softer sound to them and, when combined with the rising intonation mentioned previously, produce a very gentle tone. This is considered appropriate enough to be used for almost all of Japan's many automated announcements due to its bright, succinct and polite tone, though in some situations this can be considered nasal, especially with convenience store attendants. Male SFPs have a much more guttural tone, and the sounds are generally lower in tone and have rougher, less distinct ending sounds.

While the Japanese language is traditionally characterized by these separate male and female registers, it appears that language norms for Japanese women are changing. Research conducted by Shigeko Okamoto and Shie Sato in the 1990s drew attention to anecdotal evidence that suggested some women — in particular younger women — are increasingly using neutral and even masculine forms instead of traditionally accepted feminine forms of speech. When considered in its cultural context, this allows for a glimpse into the changing social atmosphere regarding gender roles.

These writers also provided some empirical evidence to substantiate this suggested trend for the domain of SFPs in casual conversation. In 1998, Hirofumi Asada reported that the use of SFPs among young female students is infrequent, if present at all. In a 2003 article on SFPs, Kyoko Kawasaki and Kirsty McDougall compared SFP usage in Japanese textbook dialogues with their occurrences in natural conversation. The data on SFP usage were collected from a number of JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) textbooks and then compared with the spoken conversation data provided by Okamoto and Sato in 1992 to determine the extent to which SFP usage in the textbooks reflected the actual usage in contemporary spoken language (Table 3).

Very little conversational data is available for males. In 1998, Asada provided one other relevant study that examined the conversations of Japanese male university students. He recorded the conversations of three male/female pairs (aged 19-22) and asked them all to spend ten minutes discussing each of three topics. The ensuing data was not necessarily representative of common usage of SFPs because the range of subjects participating in the study was quite small and the setting was highly controlled. It should be noted, however, that all subjects showed some use of feminine SFPs, which was not observed in any of the examined textbooks. Kawasaki and McDougall showed that male speakers had begun to use feminine speech of late — even to the point that there is more reported usage of feminine SFPs as opposed to masculine SFPs.

Who is our target?

So where does this leave us with the issue of localization? Probably the most important consideration is the target audience of the material for which one is localizing. In the film and computer games industries, the nuances of gender in speech are of paramount importance. They are, after all, what makes characters unique. Imagine, for instance, if a computer game's female protagonist has her refined but heavy-handed wording rendered into an inappropriate format so that she loses her mannerisms and becomes run-of-the mill in terms of her impression. If the subtle differences in the speech of a male or female character are not picked up by the translator, this can dramatically change the impression that the character evokes and alter his or her impact on the audience. If the target audience is teenagers from 15 to 19 years of age, they will most likely find it easier to associate with an emotionally charged protagonist, one who has a fiery nature and delivers impassioned speeches. If this character speaks with a nonchalant tone, the urge to identify with the character or to pursue the character's goals is compromised, and ultimately the player will lose interest. This would cause the game to become unpopular, thereby resulting in a loss of sales and profit for the company producing the game.

This also proves true in the realm of cinema subtitling, where the characters and their words are key to the enjoyment of the film. For example, to adequately portray the refined yet edgy tone that Lestat evokes in *Interview with the Vampire*, his speech must be rendered in an appropriate way or else it loses its effect. Thus, its potency is drained, and the atmosphere of the film is negatively affected for audiences who rely upon subtitles for understanding.

How and what do we localize — cultural differences, symbols, gestures?

In addition to the differences between female and male spoken language, cultural differences are also another factor to

Sentence type	Group A (%) 7 students aged 18–23	Group B (%) 3 housewives aged 27–34	Group C (%) 4 married professional women aged 45-57	Female speech in textbooks (%)	Male speech in textbooks (%)
Masculine	5	0	0	0	13
Neutral	81	75	50	1	66
Feminine	4	12	28	59	0
Other	10	13	23	40	21
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3: Female native speakers compared with female/male characters' speech in textbooks.
Source: Kawasaki and McDougall

consider when localizing. In an interview with IGN.com, the localization team for *Lost Odyssey* for the Xbox 360 gives some pointers, describing a scene where one of the characters fondly remembers her deceased mother. She describes how her mother collected potholders but would never use them, picking up hot pots with her bare hands instead and burning her fingers. The mother would then touch her burned fingers to her earlobes. "In the audio studio, all the native English speakers just looked at one another in confusion. It was a cultural reference that didn't make sense to us. Our Localization PM explained to us that, in Japan, if you burn your fingers, you touch them to the coolest part of your body (your ear lobes). It was a very funny moment when I explained that, in the U.S., we jump up and down and shake our hands going 'Ow! Ow! Ow!' then run for the sink to run our aching fingers under cold water. I think, in the end, we decided to leave the dialog as written because it had a charming quality to it, but there's an example of a cultural action that didn't cross the Japanese/English barrier accurately." (http://uk.xbox360.ign.com/articles/772/772809 p1.html)

There are two integral parts to a successful localization: turning the source material into an acceptable translation — making the text accessible and understandable for a foreign audience — and crossing the cultural gap. Japanese sensitivity in certain areas varies massively from the Western standard — for example, what would be a side-splittingly funny joke to the Japanese might just cause confusion for Westerners. Japanese attitudes toward adult content and extreme language are far more relaxed than the American perspective, and, as such, certain scenes may need editing before the product can be released.

A final example from the games industry highlights the issues faced in localizing Japanese to the Western market. This example comes courtesy of "Uncensored Censorship: Translation vs. Localization" by Daniel Orner of RPGamer.com: "A good *localization* into [American] English is meant to make a game feel like it was made by people who understand American culture — not by people who only understand Japanese. And from my own online script editing efforts in the emulation/translation community, I can tell you that it's incredibly difficult." The process is a creative one, and most sections must be rewritten from scratch rather than taken word by word, Orner goes on to say.

Purists argue that any creativity by the translator erodes the original idea of the Japanese writer, but games, after all, are meant to be enjoyed by their target audiences. An American audience might not know anything at all about Japanese culture, and in order to be enjoyable both the jokes and the conversation should make sense in English. This goes as far as localizing nonsense syllables included in the original format. In this case, Orner suggests making up nonsense syllables that English speakers can more easily remember: "We're just not wired to remember the consonant-vowel syllables that make up the Japanese language," he says. "For example, a nonsense Japanese name might be something like 'Dodobaka', whereas a better English one could be something like 'Folgish.' Which one sticks in *your* mind?" (www.rpgamer.com/editor/2003/q2/051903do.html)

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Conclusion

There are distinct differences in the way in which men and women express themselves in Japanese, some similar in inflection and effect to those used in English, whereas others represent an entirely different social area. The understanding and interpretations of these linguistic differences in text with a heavy media impact, such as games, films, audio subtitling and so on, are of paramount importance. As modern Japanese evolves, the differences between these two levels of language will become narrower, and perhaps this will be reconciled over time. For the time being, however, the social implications and attitudes intertwined with the use of these linguistic elements are far reaching and must be kept in context to keep the translation close to the source material.

Thus, good translators should always keep in mind the social background, age range and target audience of a given product so that they may allow the translation to reflect the linguistic and cultural context with which it was originally intended. **M**

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