



ALPHA



6 essential tips for localizing into Korean and Japanese

White Paper

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There are huge opportunities for brands looking to localize for the Japanese and South Korean markets. These are, after all, the world's 4th and 12th-largest economies respectively with extremely high levels of digital penetration.

So we talked to our language experts in Japan and South Korea to find out their top tips for localizing into their respective languages.

From the seven levels of formality used in Korean to how the Japanese attitude to religion can affect approaches to localization, we've brought together these essential tips from those who know the cultures inside out.

Of course, given the fascinating nature of these languages and cultures, there's plenty more to say on how to localize for these markets. So if you have any questions on Korean or Japanese localization or there are any other issues that you'd like to hear more on, please [get in touch](#).

Top tips for localizing into Korean

1. Choose the right level of formality

In many Western languages, we're used to making choices relating to the formality of language we use for certain audiences – for example, “vous” and “tu” are used to express the pronoun “you” in French in formal and less formal contexts respectively.

However, in Korean it gets much more complex. There are, in fact, seven distinct language levels which each express a different degree of formality you should use when talking to different audiences. Making sure you adopt the most appropriate one in your localized Korean content is an important consideration. The seven levels of formality have developed partly through the influence of Confucian philosophy on Korean society, which places great importance on addressing older people and people with particular status in society with the proper degree of respect.

In practice, in modern Korea there are only four styles of speech which are regularly used to express different levels of formality. These are described below, in descending levels of formality.

- **Hasipsio-che (하십시오체):** this is the most formal level, used by broadcasters, politicians, managers and when talking to elders.
- **Haera-che (해라체):** this is a more popular formal style which is also more relaxed than Hasipsio-che. It can often be found in textbooks, journals, reported speech and also in everyday speech between people of the same rank – it is also known as the “plain form”.
- **Haeyo-che (해요체):** this is an informal but polite style of speech and can be found in use commonly between both strangers and work colleagues.
- **Haeyo-che (해요체):** This is the most informal and casual level of speech, as used commonly between friends, family and young people.

Obviously this is only the briefest description of what are complex cultural and linguistic traditions. The main point is this: when localizing for South Korea, make sure you use a native-speaking expert who will ensure the most appropriate level of formality when translating or adapting languages for different audience groups.

2. Understand how the Korean's non-linear sentence structure can affect your translation approach

In English, we are used to building sentences in a linear approach where sense builds from beginning to end of a sentence in a “linear” fashion; for example, “I took my dog to the park with my friend after lunch”.

Korean has a very different grammatical structure which is certainly not linear in the same way English is. Rather than the word order, sense is derived in the Korean language from the use of around 20 particles which are placed after words to determine their meaning within a sentence.

This can prove challenging when localization teams are asked to translate “phrase by phrase” into Korean. Modern translation management systems often use “strings” in which parts of sentences or phrases are translated in isolation and can then, in theory, be used verbatim elsewhere.

For Korean, it’s extremely important to localize text and speech within the full context of the content around it. Without this context, grammatical correctness and even meaning can be at risk.

3. Take account of loan words

All languages evolve of course, and Korean is no different. Due to the large influence of the US in South Korea, there has been a huge range of English words that have become a part of everyday Korean language, albeit often in adapted forms.

Some sound exactly the same: for example, the Korean word for “menu” (메뉴) sounds exactly the same as its English version. Some sound similar, but have a slight twist: the Korean word for “orange” (오렌지) is pronounced as “orenji”.

So far, this is not a difficult concept to grasp, after all, all languages import loan words to some degree or other.

However, with the ever-growing influence of the internet, a huge array of words adapted from English is continuously being added to the lexicon of everyday Koreans.

For example, a 디카 (pronounced dika) means “digital camera” to most Koreans. And the influence of big international brands can be pervasive; for Koreans, the brand name “Burberry” (버버리) now generically means a “trench coat”.

With the influence of the internet, the use of loan words (not just from English, but also from languages including Chinese, Japanese and German) in Korean continues to grow.

In particular, to engage with younger audiences who have grown up with the internet since birth, it’s important to use native-speaking translators who have their finger on the Korean linguistic pulse as it evolves.

Top tips for localizing into Japanese

1. Choose the right level of formality

Using the appropriate level of formality in language is as important in Japanese as it is in Korean.

Degrees of formality are built right into the structure of the Japanese language and there's no way to gloss over it or get around it. What's more, getting it wrong will be very noticeable and jarring to any Japanese audience.

It's not just that words need to be replaced with more formal-sounding ones in certain contexts. In Japanese, the entire structure of a sentence will change according to the level of formality. The directionality of verbs is very important too in terms of formality; for example, is the verb going from me to you, or from you to me?

So, translating a seemingly neutral phrase such as: "Tell me what time you're free tomorrow" would become something more like the following in Japanese:

- "Could my humble self possibly be told what honorable time is convenient?"
- Or "I would be pleased to be told what time is convenient".

To Western ears, this of course sounds highly formalized and unnatural.

But, for a Japanese speaker all of this is second nature and nobody is really thinking of it in terms of their "humble self" versus the "honoured other". It's simply the way people speak to each other in certain situations. It's a style that's built in the language and needs to be taken into account in any type of content to be localized.

2. Emphasize the importance of context

Another important consideration when localizing for Japanese is just how different from Latin and Germanic languages Japanese can be – and why this makes context so important.

For example, there are no plurals in Japanese. There are also no equivalents to "a/an" and "the". Or more accurately, these are implied and not written or pronounced. So "the dog" and "a dog" are both rendered as "dog" and it's up to the listener or reader to understand what is meant by context.

In Japanese, the object of a sentence is also often just implied and not mentioned. So when you want to say "I will give you this", you usually just say "I will give this" and it's understood by context who it's for.

For reasons like this, in order to produce a good translation into (or from) Japanese it's usually necessary to be given a lot more contextual information than might be necessary with translations into (or from) other languages.

3. Understand Japan's relaxed attitude to religion

While it is of course always important to be sensitive and respectful with regards to religious references, it's also useful to know that Japanese culture has what some have described as a tolerant and relaxed approach to religion.

Religion plays a role in Japanese society but in a different way to many other countries. While it's common for Japanese to engage in religious practices and use religious language, the culture in Japan is generally diverse and open with regards to these practices and language.

For example, Buddhist shrines are mixed in with Shinto temples and many Japanese wouldn't be able to tell you offhand what the difference is between them. It's common for Japanese couples to be married in a Christian church, and funerals are generally Buddhist ceremonies.

Within the culture, stories and games created in Japan may make casual references to God or gods in a way that is looser and more diverse than some other cultures.

So if you're localizing into Japanese, you can realize that most audiences will understand and respond to a diversity of (respectful) religious references taken from different cultures.

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