

Japanese Localization Report

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Japanese Language Overview

tl;dr: Japanese is extremely complex, flexible, and expressive. The complexity of the language makes it naturally suited for unique puzzles. The vast range of “correct” translations makes it challenging to localize, as these possible translations have different nuances. It is important to provide localizers as much information as possible in terms of character profiles, intended audience reaction, narrative context, etc. for accurate localization.

Japanese is the primary language of >99% of Japanese citizens. Its written form is characterized by the way it combines Chinese characters (漢字 Kanji) with the syllabic alphabets Hiragana (ひらがな) and Katakana (カタカナ). Modern Japanese vocabulary is approximately 50% Chinese origin, 30% original Japanese origin, 10% other foreign origin, and 10% mixed origin.⁹

Japanese grammar differs significantly from English and other Indo-European languages. Seemingly important parts of a sentence, such as the subject, are often implied. Nouns also lack number, gender, or articles, and are similarly inferred from context.

Example Japanese Sentences

When Japanese is written horizontally, as is common in digital media, it is read left-to-right¹⁰.

君にこの謎が解けるかな

In print media such as books or newspapers, it is written vertically and read top-down then right-to-left.

君
に
こ
の
謎
が
解
け
る
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な

⁹ <https://user.keio.ac.jp/~rhotta/hellog/2017-12-31-1.html>

¹⁰ There are historical contexts in which it is read right-to-left even when horizontal.

Uses and Properties of Katakana

Shared properties with Hiragana

Since it is syllabic like Hiragana, Katakana shares its ambiguities and difficulty reading when strung together. One way to mitigate this in a situation when only Hiragana and Katakana are available might be to alternate between the two. Consider the following:

きのうはいしやにいった
キノウはイシャニイッタ

In a fill in the blank puzzle where きのう, いしや, and といった are answers, making the fill-ins Katakana would help remove ambiguities in the completed sentence.

Similar to Hiragana, Katakana also shares uses such as being a more accessible replacement for Kanji for difficult words or due to technical limitations.

For foreign words and names

This is the primary use of Katakana. Words that are created in Japan, but that have foreign origin, such as “karaoke” (kara “empty” + orchestra). Also note that names with Chinese origin, such as names of China, Korea, and Taiwan are often expressed in Kanji instead of Katakana.

By replacing a Japanese word with a loanword, you can add to a foreign atmosphere:

Consider the example sentence:

君にこの謎が解けるかな

Replacing 謎 with ミステリー it becomes:

君にこのミステリーが解けるかな

By using ミステリー (misuteri-, in other words mystery), one could play into the western academy environment of Escape Academy.

But note that the term ミステリー is more closely associated with ominous mysteries like murder mysteries. If the connotation is to be more like a riddle or a game, you could use パズル:

君にこのパズルが解けるかな

Using パズル (pazuru, or puzzle) gives it a more game-y vibe.

To appear cool or smart

Foreign words are often considered “cool” or “smart.” Part of this is definitely due to Western spheres being considered civilised or technologically advanced. But it is also likely partly due to the Katakana script’s use of straight lines and sharp angles that give it a sleek appearance. It is common to replace simple Japanese words with longer foreign ones to appear advanced, which is called 横文字を使う (“to use horizontal words”). Overuse can make one appear overly

For enigma or increased difficulty

Katakana can be used to signify mystery or cipher. **If a puzzle works in both Hiragana and Katakana, you can use Katakana to make it harder to recognize common words.**

For emphasis and for neologisms

Being the least common of the 3 scripts, turning a normally Hiragana or Kanji word into Katakana has the effect of emphasizing the word. When creating a new word, it is common to make the word Katakana to indicate this.

For example, *Pikmin 4* uses the term 段取り (dandori), which roughly means to follow a procedure. “Good dandori” refers to forward thinking and good planning. In the game, 段取り is stylized as the Katakana ダンドリ to emphasize the concept, and signify that achieving good dandori is the primary goal of the game. This was retained in the English localization, where instead of calling it “planning,” it uses the romanization “Dandori.”



In **Escape Academy**, the term “Escape” is used in a similar fashion, as an art to be perfected. Instead of localizing escape literally as 脱出, I would use the English word エスケープ.

For example:

I’m a master of Escape!
俺はエスケープの達人だぜ！

In the case that “Master of Escape” is a formal degree or title, it would be appropriate to use Katakana for “Master” as well:
俺はエスケープマスターだぜ！

This has the additional effect of matching the Western academy setting of the game.

Kanji

Kanji refers to Chinese character scripts. Kanji often represent ideas, but can also represent syllables. Kanji are based on traditional Chinese characters, which is the form currently used in areas such as Taiwan. Below is “Kanji” represented in Kanji:

	漢	字
Pronunciation	Kan	Ji
Meaning	Han (the Chinese dynasty)	Symbol

You can see that “Kanji” literally means “Chinese-Symbol” in Japanese. Chinese characters themselves derive from shapes of objects, or a combination of shapes and sounds. Consider the components of 漢:

	氵	灾
Pronunciation		Kan
Meaning	Water	Disaster
Origin	From image of flowing water	Likely from fire/sun + priest

The combination of “water” and “disaster” reflects the origin of the name “Han/Kan”, which is the name of a river that brought disaster at times. The pronunciation of the character “Kan” comes from the “disaster” part. Other Kanji that use the same “disaster” are read similarly and have related meanings, such as: 嘆(tan, mouth + disaster = lament) and 難 (nan, disaster + bird = difficult). As such, the pronunciation and meaning of Kanji can often be inferred, even if you have not studied them before.

However, “Kan” is just one reading and meaning of 漢. The character can also be read “otoko”, meaning “man.” This likely evolved from the meaning of Han as a race. Note that “otoko” is a pronunciation that derives from Japanese, not Chinese. Kanji thus frequently have multiple readings, some derived from Chinese phonetics and others from Japanese phonetics. The way to read Kanji needs to be inferred from context.

Japanese Dialogue

Japanese has an extremely varied spoken language. Below, I list some unique characteristics that need to be considered for localization.

Politeness (Keigo)

Japanese has a system of honorifics called Keigo. Seniority and social standing of both the speaker and listener factor into what language is used. Proper use of Keigo is vital to business relations, and misuse can make one the target of ridicule. Many verbs and conjugations change completely based on Keigo, for example:

Meaning	Verb (standard)	Respectful of superiors	Humbling self	Polite to others
To see/observe	見る (miru)	ご覧になる (go-ran ni naru)	拝見する (haiken suru)	見ます(mimasu)
To say	言う (iu/yuu)	おっしゃる (ossharu)	申す (mousu)	言います (iimasu)
To eat	食べる (taberu)	召し上がる (meshiagaru)	いただく(itadaku)	食べます (tabemasu)

Despite its perceived importance, Keigo is one of the more difficult aspects of Japanese learning, and many phrases are misused even by native speakers.

For the purposes of localization, it is important to provide localizers the relative seniority and social standings of each character, as well as how likely they are to respect social customs. For example, It is frequent for characters to be impolite with enemies, polite with allies, but impolite/casual with close friends. Proper use of Keigo conveys these relationships with the reader.

Pronouns and Sentence endings

Japanese has an unusually abundant set of pronouns, to the point where it is unknown how many there are. For first-person pronouns alone, it is definitely above 100, each with different connotations. Consider the recent English trend of introducing oneself with 3rd person pronouns he/him, she/her, they/them, etc. Doing so is an expression of identity, especially in terms of gender. Japanese pronouns also do this, but incorporate countless other axes such as rural vs. urban, traditional vs. modern, low vs. high social standing, young vs. old and submissive vs. assertive. It is common for one's pronouns to change depending on who is being spoken to. For example, I use 僕 (ore) when speaking with close friends, 僕 (boku) or 自分 (jibun) when speaking with acquaintances, and 私 (watashi) when speaking with strangers.

Caesar Cipher

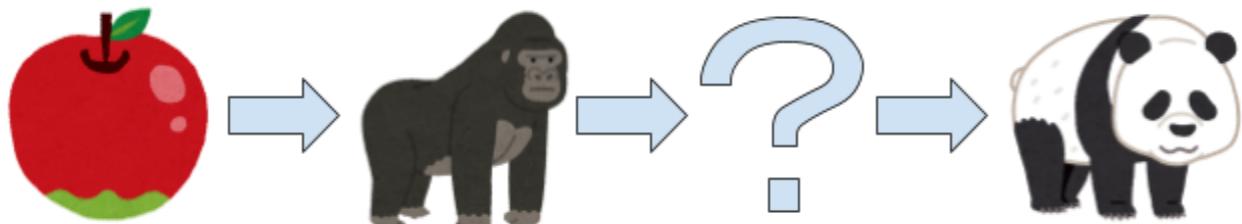
It is common to shift Hiragana by X-amount according to the 50-sound ordering. Example¹⁷:

朝	→	石
足	→	椅子
青	→	?

When expressed in Hiragana, the first row is あさ -> いし, so each character is shifted forward by one. The answer is therefore あお shifted by 1, or いか. Note that since the 50-sound table is arranged regularly in columns of 5, shifting in this way changes the pronunciation in predictable ways, ex. most -a syllables become -i, -i becomes -u, etc. This makes it much easier to solve compared to the Latin alphabet, where the order of letters is not related to their function. **It can be appropriate to express words in Romaji instead, so that Latin alphabet ciphers such as ROT13 can be used.**

Shiritori

Shiritori is a game where players take turns saying nouns, with each word starting with the last Hiragana character of the previous word. It is a ubiquitous children's game, and is thus used in some puzzles.



Typical Shiritori puzzle. りんご→gorilla→?→ぱんだ, so the answer must start with ら and end with ぱ. A possible answer is らっぱ (horn, the instrument).

¹⁷ <https://harunazo.com/howto/gojuon/>

Kanji Puzzles

Kanji are naturally suited for puzzles. Below, I list some common types.

Splitting or assembling parts

This category of Kanji puzzles makes use of how Kanji are often formed from other Kanji.

Example:



You have a horn (角), katana (刀), and a cow (牛). Combining them gives the character 解 (answer).

Similarly, you could provide a Kanji, and then split it into different words to be used for other puzzles.

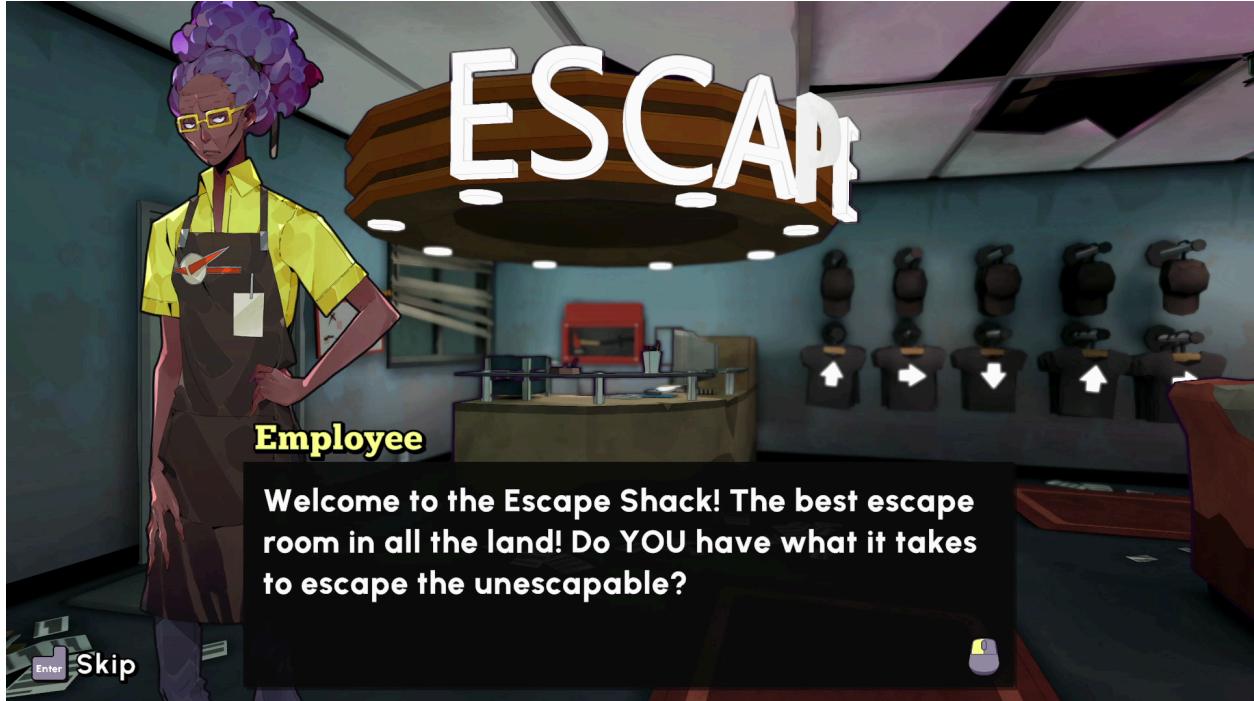
You can create special dial locks or puzzle pieces that create Kanji:

1	2
氵	己
言	会
糸	十

The pairing that creates 3 valid Kanji is: 汁 記 繪. Other Kanji that can be made but that leave the other parts without a pair are: 紀 計.

Displaying Dialogue

In English, there are places where multiple sentences are displayed at once. For legibility purposes, I would make use of line breaks when possible, keeping all textboxes within 3 lines.



Recommended dialogue:

スタッフ
 「エスケープ：小屋からの脱出」へようこそ！
 世界最高の脱出ゲームさ！
 脱出不可能と言われたこの小屋から君は逃げられるかな？

Note that here I do not use the name “Escape Shack” since “shack” is not a recognized word in Japan and sounds lame if translated. Instead, I title the escape room similarly to existing real-life escape rooms, as “Escape from the Shack.” If the name “Escape Shack” ends up being referenced again, one would likely need to use the original name even if it doesn’t sound “hip”, like “エスケープの小屋” or “脱出小屋”.

In some cases, English text might not fit in the same number of text boxes as Japanese, I would recommend supporting different numbers of textboxes if possible.