

**Localization: Beyond Translation**  
**Alexander Kuzimski**  
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Since foreign films and other media from overseas, such as video games, are often composed initially in their native language, there is already a culture barrier between the content and the audience. While some people enjoy watching a movie in its original format, the majority of viewers do not have the patience, skills or brainpower to read subtitles or interpret foreign dialogue on the fly. Therefore, in order for the media to reach a larger audience, the processes of translation and localization must be completed.

Translation is a very straightforward process that most people are familiar with when it comes to bringing media to audiences who are foreigners to the original language. This means that translation is a simple word-for-word conversion of the media in question into the language for intended viewers. But stopping at this stage means that the process is still incomplete. Modern audiences would be as disappointed with the results as if they were watching the original dubs of *Godzilla*.

Localization is less about words and more about how words are perceived in context. The localization process is a “culture translation,” the process by which the first translation of a foreign media is remastered into a format that makes it familiar to the intended audience. To be more specific, the only purpose of translation is to convert the language from the original to that of the audience (*Wikipedia*). Translation is flat and possesses little true artistic value. Often a translation will not be able to adequately embody the creator’s intent. Localization is different because once a media form is translated into another language, it is then necessary to change the translation in an artistic way in order to create a better connection with the audience. Often, localization can involve very heavy editing in order to make media more suitable for the intended audience. A translation may tell us what is being said, but after localization, we can finally understand how the dialogue is being said. The difficulty lies not so much in making the media understandable, but in actually keeping true to the work of the original director and keeping the important meanings and messages intact.

Localization has many different aspects that make it a complicated topic to discuss. Some of these difficulties include the challenges experienced by the localization team, the way the audience responds to a localized work, and the growth of the market for localized media. For the purposes of this report, I will focus on the concepts behind localizing anime (Japanese cartoons) and video games as these are the media forms that I am most familiar with when it comes to the issues of localization.

## Challenges

There are many unique challenges presented by the localization process. Directors face the greatest challenge when they attempt to localize foreign media (*Miyazaki*). Before translation even takes place, there is the question of which audience will actually be interested in receiving the new localized version. Very different procedures take place depending on the intended audience's age or where the finished product is intended to be distributed (either for TV, for movie, or for home video). Quite often, the unlocalized media is intended for an older audience in Japan than the final localized versions of the same work are in America; this stems from artistic differences that influence how the media is perceived by each culture. While exploring this boundary can be an interesting venture for a skillful director, when it comes to children, being conservative is the traditional route. Anime often contains sexual innuendos and bloody violence even in children's shows (albeit proportionally subdued for a proportionally younger audience), which would not be well received by the parents of the American audience. However, the story and plot in many of these shows are too simple to entertain older audiences. If the FCC rated a show with such a plot for ages PG-13 or TV-14 simply based on the visual content and not the story, the show or movie would not be successful because the target audience would be passed over. To compensate for this, localization takes on a much deeper role than simply changing dialogue for cultural references. A fine example of this method of localization happened during the creation of the English-language version of the anime *Naruto*. In Japan, the target audience for this series was seven to fifteen-year-olds. However, the show contained mild bloody violence and a few jokes about homosexuality. The company who acquired the rights to localize *Naruto* wanted to make the show appropriate for television broadcast, and in order to make the show as successful as possible, the sure route to take would be to localize for the audience who would most appreciate the story. Removing the blood and sexual jokes would take away the main appeal to the older spectrum of the original audience. Since the story would be easier to keep intact for an audience of seven to ten-year-olds, the mature content was removed. Therefore, in this way, it was made possible to market *Naruto* during primetime instead of during late-night television.

Voice actors are necessary for the dubbed version of a localized work. Their challenge is to substitute for the actor who came before them (*Anime Advocates*, 5). This can be a tricky business when the only direction they receive is from the localization director. They may have to watch the original version in order to acquire enough inspiration to be true to the original actors.

## Complaints

Localization removes confusing aphorisms and other cultural phrases that will not be understood if they are simply left intact. However, as audiences become more familiar with the original culture of their localized shows, some members of the audience expect a certain level of culture to remain intact (*Rec.Arts*).

Directors who work on localization can also come under fire from fans who feel that over-editing distorts the original intent of the media's creator. Undesirable over-editing usually comes in the form of video edits that are made to remove some "undesirable" aspect of the media other than blood or violence. For example, the first episode of *Naruto* contains a joke about homosexuality. This was removed from the American TV version to make the series suitable for younger audiences. However, older audiences that wanted the series to suit their tastes better felt belittled by this decision because it portrays an impression that America has a bad case of homophobia. Another example of this kind of localization took place in the anime *Pokémon*. At one time, the main character was depicted eating an onigiri (Japanese rice ball), which is a food that is unfamiliar to American audiences (*Wikipedia*). During localization, the onigiri was replaced with a club sandwich.

## Compliments

With a higher demand for quality work, the average standard for localization has become much better. It can be said as an industry-wide norm that the average works of today are better than the average works of the pioneers of localization. Older media did not receive large budgets and those titles, such as *Sailor Moon*, are not respected for their poor localization. However, we need to remember these titles for the way they boldly introduced a new media to foreign markets. Some of the most acclaimed movies in recent years have been the works of Hayao Miyazaki. *Spirited Away* is a prime example of localization at its finest. As the 2003 winner of the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, a localized film had finally reached a mainstream audience and much acclaim.

## The Market

In a world where the distance between people is shrinking, the necessity for globalization in even the smallest companies has been growing rapidly in the past decade. In fact, in an interesting reversal, the American video game company Electronic Arts (EA) has begun a campaign to better its localization within the Japanese market (*Game Localization Network Ltd.*). Basing their new localization headquarters in Australia (hoping to make gains from being geographically closer to Japan), EA hopes to achieve its own globalization goals by mimicking the success of

the many Japanese companies that have already set high standards within their own market.

However, sometimes the market speaks for itself. A recent announcement revealed that the vastly popular anime *One Piece* is going to be changing hands on the localization side of its market (*animeOnline*). But in order to understand the whole story behind this market shift, I will need to start at the beginning when *One Piece* was first licensed for release in America. Unlike *Naruto*, the Japanese version of *One Piece* was a teen-only TV show. Nearly every episode contained violence, blood, and vulgar language, as well as references to tobacco, alcohol, and sexual innuendos. Licensed by 4Kids Entertainment, they decided to edit *One Piece* with a heavy hand to make it safe for seven-year olds (see attached graphics on page 9 for examples of the extent of the edit). Unfortunately, this edit forced 4Kids to rewrite much of the plot and cut out whole episodes that would otherwise be incoherent if all the “necessary” editing was done.

The fans of *One Piece* objected en masse to all of this editing. The anime, which was a blockbuster in Japan, had failed to catch the attention of the American audience. As *One Piece* ratings fell lower and lower, 4Kids finally announced that they would not continue localization. Seeing a chance to take advantage of a competitor’s failure, FUNimation took the licensing rights for *One Piece* and has loudly announced that they will be doing things differently. In an interview with FUNimation’s marketing director, Lance Heiskell, the anime fan-website *animeOnline* revealed the exact nature of these different localization tactics:

**animeOnline:** How’s this going to work? Are you guys going to start the series over, or what?

**Heiskell:** No, no. We’re starting with the original Japanese episodes 144 through 205.

**animeOnline:** Why is that?

**Heiskell:** Well, it was kind of a group decision...[we] wanted to keep *One Piece* on TV – that’s good for everybody.

**animeOnline:** Will the TV version be edited?

**Heiskell:** Yes... We’re going for a PG version on TV.

**animeOnline:** So what are the DVD plans? They’ll be uncut, right?

**Heiskell:** Totally uncut. What you see is what you get.

**animeOnline:** How will you release the DVDs?

**Heiskell:** We know that *One Piece* is a long, ongoing show, and we’ve learned in the past from fan feedback, forums, [and] conventions...

From this summarized interview alone it is evident that FUNimation intends to learn from the mistakes of 4Kids and localize *One Piece* in accordance with the audience’s wishes. This transformation of localization from being a niche market to having mainstream influences shows the growth of the market for localization in only fifteen years.

## **Conclusion**

While translation takes the initial step towards integrating a foreign work with the audience of another country, localization allows the true understanding and artistic message to be understood. It is a difficult process, and it is often impossible to make everyone happy with the finished product. However, when you consider the options of forcing the viewers to read subtitles or having the potential to have a mainstream audience as viewers, the potential for artistic editing is very great.

In the previous sections I have discussed localization in great detail, as I hoped to give the reader a greater understanding of what localization is and how it is important. The challenges of localization are great for many people, including the voice actors and the directors. Complaints and compliments from the fan base are another common occurrence when the localization process is finished, and localization companies go to great lengths to please their customers. In the past decade the market for localization has grown substantially with the increasing popularity of video games and anime and it will continue to thrive as localization continues to reach higher and higher standards.



Left: muzzle-loading rifle on one guy's back and the other is smoking a cigarette. (unedited)  
Right: now a giant, water gun on his back and the other guy is just breathing smoke. (edited)



Left: this establishment is obviously a casino. (unedited)  
Right: a TV show for seven-year olds cannot have gambling references? (edited)



Left: another firearm reference. (unedited)  
Right: just like the casino sign, the gun was completely removed. (edited)

Images from Japanator: <http://www.japanator.com/bad-dubbing-one-piece>

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