

# From The Local To The Global: Translation Processes Challenging Japanese Work Practices

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## Abstract

The automotive industry is the world's largest manufacturing industry by volume, capital, employees and annual turnover. As the competition for markets and models intensifies in an age of intercontinental corporate mergers, acquisitions and takeovers, the winners are manufacturers that can convince the consumer that their product is the more desirable one. Next generation vehicles are exploring alternative energy sources, increased computer based guidance instrumentation and a range of associated new technologies aimed at passenger safety and comfort as well as improved fuel efficiency and reduced maintenance issues. Reporting all this to the customer or vehicle owner is a new challenge that takes last century methods of operation into new fields of translation, interpretation, description and technical manual writing.

As part of this push for global market dominance in a digital borderless information age, technical manual writers face several identified challenges. These are cultural, technical, digital, and linguistic. All have to do with value judgments designed to produce a product that will have the ultimate appeal, quality and selling capability. This article chronicles the key issues along the path of documenting a unique piece of engineering into the world market place. The focus here is not car engineering. The focus is on the language that explains, maintains and packages cars.

## Introduction

*Your company does not belong in markets where it can't be the best.*

Marketing Around the Globe, Kotler, 2003

This is the story of a company<sup>1)</sup> that specializes in producing technical manuals for a range of employers, among which a very prominent Japanese auto manufacturer is a major customer. It is a story that focuses on the process by which technical manuals are written. It is also a story of intercultural and inter-professional issues. The intercultural issues concern how Japanese engineers label parts and processes, and how these are converted by highly trained translators into a consumer-friendly manual that invites use, rather than frightening off potential users as being inaccessible. Further, it is a story of the difficulties faced and hurdles overcome to getting a Far East Asian product into the global market. It is also a story of two native-speaking English Language educators working with a translation and technical manual producing company, and the bumps and starts on that road.

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1) To preserve the anonymity of this company because of the competitive nature of the business, its name and any information that could lead to its identification has been purposefully omitted.

The manufacturer uses a number of contracted companies in Japan to produce technical manuals for the more than 26 models that are produced and marketed by this multinational company around the world. These are produced largely in Japan because of the proximity to the engineering manufacturing base, and the ongoing need for the writers to consult with the manufacturer and their technical specifications and explanations. It is also a matter of pride for the manufacturer that the entire automotive product together with accompanying documents emanates from Japan. Just as the engineering developments come from Japan, so it is also the manufacturer's pride that all product documentation should also come from Japan. This article postulates that the supremacy of the former is unquestioned. That of the latter, however, needs careful examination to reach technical manual benchmarks identified here which remain competitive with global market standards.

These manuals are also partly composed out of Japan because the locus of expertise at times calls for local knowledge, linguistic and cultural. This is not about advertising or marketing cars, this is about how best to produce technical manuals that are easy to understand, easy to read in English and to be translated from English into third target languages. Simultaneously it is about agreeing on formats and expressions, on standardizing certain usages as contained in proofreading guidelines, on comparing technical material produced in Japan with those of competitors and deciding which parts are unique to the manufacturer's product and which parts should be rewritten to achieve global acceptance.

It is, centrally, a story about quality control, line management and how best to achieve a standard that is at least equal to, unique, maybe in parts even superior to standards of technical writing competitors in the competition at home and overseas, in English and non-English speaking countries.

*The relentless pursuit of excellence.*

(A maxim that has served Toyota well)

In the competition that defines the marketplace, there is an ongoing and aggressive questioning of the value of the local to the global, and vice versa. It is the quality and cost of the local that will or will not survive in the global market. The unique challenge posed by globalization is the continuous scrutiny of value, comparing that value to other values. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

To paraphrase Jefferson and any Japanese auto manufacturer today, the price of continuous global market success is eternal vigilance so that ongoing market dominance is kept in perpetual pursuit of excellence by various checks and balances that must be external to the manufacturer for auditor neutrality, objectivity and clarity of view. The marketplace is arguably the most severe judge of the success or otherwise of any product through appeal and sales. Ease of use (of technical manuals) must be the ultimate criterion of success, surely any automotive engineer would agree.

Car manufacturers are huge multinational companies that have many departments, many staff, many countries and languages to service. Each department has its own productivity goals, technical improvement targets and cost minimization strategies. It follows therefore that a car manufacturer has a production policy that includes subcontracting to a myriad of outside suppliers, including the writing of manuals. This is done to minimize manufacturing investment and to minimize cost of parts. To some

extent, however, Japanese car manufacturers are caught up in a Japanese definition of themselves, one of pride at local product origin. How justifiable is that pride? An answer is here proposed.

## **Problem Statement and Focus Question**

*The best way to hold customers is to constantly figure out how to give them more for less.*

Brand Building, Kotler, 2003

The untested and assumed problem was that the staff of the company would benefit from English language improvement. What was not immediately apparent were issues of quality control (to deadlines) that the company were wrestling with and how best to improve work practices to achieve the former while extending English language ability of staff.

The focus question in writing this article became associated with the nature of collaboration between two internationally experienced English language educators and a technical manual writing company with a proud record of growth. How can university and industry learn from and benefit each other?

The focus question thus became “*How best can quality control of technical manuals be enhanced through the use of experienced English language educators applied linguistics?*”

The untested assumption was that some staff of the company producing manuals (almost 400), would benefit from discussing issues of applied linguistics, from English language improvement. What was not immediately apparent were issues of quality control (to deadlines) that the company were wrestling with and how best to improve work practices to achieve the former while extending English language ability of staff.

### Defining Standards

1. What standard?
2. Whose standard?
3. Which standard among standards?
4. A quantitative standard measured in verbal volume?
5. A qualitative standard measured in layout, format, simplicity?
6. Japanese standard?
7. Western standard (European (EU), American)?
8. Which standard best guarantees success in the marketplace?
9. Standard or benchmark? What is the difference?

Such questions enter any professional discussion about writing technical manuals quickly. A benchmark is an agreed industry standard, that is, a standard that best suits the purpose of any manual. That is to clearly and simply explain aspects of car maintenance to the reader. The reader is defined as a layperson, technically unschooled, but capable of simple maintenance matters concerning his/her car. The reader may or may not have English as their first language.

A particular product like a car can differ from a benchmark standard if the uniqueness of doing

so is demonstrated, thus differentiating the particular car from the wider market, and therefore arguably making it more desirable. But the Japanese writers of technical manuals, closely paying attention to engineering language and explanations, are also obliged to look at comparative manuals from a point of view of seeing how the marketplace is faring, and how those manuals compare to theirs.

## **Internal Standards**

One way that standards are defined is by the manufacturer. Arguably the first quality control question is local, not global. Does the manual produced mirror the engineer's original? Is it authentic? This is defined as looking at the original of the product and ensuring that the verbal description of the engineering parts matches the creators' intentions.

One intercultural difficulty here is linguistic in that Japanese often allows double descriptions, ostensibly to avoid ambiguity, in fact often creating the very same. As the writers are Japanese themselves, they sometimes fail to see the obvious redundancy, thus once more making the case for a native speaking editor near the final stages of manual approval.

The Japanese staff is very able, dedicated and works in small teams, and often alone. Rarely is work cross-checked, as philosophically the translator bears responsibility for their translation. This solitary work practice is inimical to team-based work that is arguably time consuming but which produces better results, especially concerning contentious or difficult points of translation.

## **External Standards**

A second way is by close checking of detail. The car manufacturing company might have three contracted companies writing technical manuals in Nagoya for their cars, and the company analyzes the accuracy of each company's manual against the other.

According to this quality control, a company might have an error rate of .3 per page, or 3 errors per 10 pages as against another company that may only have an error rate of .1, or 1 error per 10 pages<sup>2)</sup>. This performance indicator ensures that contracted companies actively scrutinize the way they make their final checks before submitting manuscripts back to the manufacturer for their final approval so that the manual can be printed for mass distribution.

While the translation company we studied produced high quality work in the sense that individual translators did their best to be faithful to the engineers and Japanese original, the work culture did not encourage group-based scrutiny of the final product so as to

- Reduce the error rate
- Iron out any final translation sticking points by consensus
- Satisfy a native user of English as to the appropriateness and accuracy of the English ultimately

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2) Errors encountered were spelling, punctuation, capitalization or incorrect expression or word, or inappropriate use of idiomatic expression or word.

in place

- Meet global standards articulated in competitors' technical manuals, or in texts governing standards in the writing of technical manuals.

## **The Future Use Of Tag Fields: Digitalisation**

As part of work practice improvement, the company is expected to manage an on-line database of tag fields that are retrievable, able to be copied and thus save time in the writing of manuals. The introduction of this is flagged for September 2004. A tag field is a phrase, sentence or commonly used expression when writing particular technical manuals that recur. By using a database of tag fields it is hoped to cut down on individual translator times. Such tag fields, if and when agreed upon, will by themselves represent industry standard and therefore have the potential of being benchmarks.

## **Global Standards**

To ensure that the translation company produces a copy that satisfies standards around the world, benchmarks are called for. But which one? The one contained in the General Motors Manual that satisfies the SAE (Standards of Automotive Engineering) criteria of the United States? The one by, say, Toyota, Nissan or Honda engineers? The one by the translation company? The one by another company, such as (but not only) General Motors?

The answers, the best benchmarks, the authors argue, are to be found in the technical manual itself, that is, in the authorship, in the process by which the joint authorship is mutually critiqued, endorsed and agreed upon.

## **How is a benchmark made?**

The process includes translating in a range of ways, by considering and involving:-

1. A line management approach to targets, timelines, deadlines
2. The Japanese Original
3. The Translator
4. Cross Checking and spell checking
5. The Writer
6. A focus or cross referencing group final editing phase
7. Data Entry for next generation

The best benchmark, the author argues, is to be found in the production of the technical manual itself, that is, in the quality of the work culture, in the process by which the authors have an opportunity to meet as a focus group, to discuss as a reference group, to mutually critique, endorse and agree upon standards from a range of perspectives as mentioned.

There are two distinct phases in generating technical manuals. The first phase might be defined as text production in the target language, generating translated text. The second phase might be defined as the quality control phase during which the above four dot point criteria are met. What emerged from my association with this company is the observation that the execution of the first phase was arguably more meticulous and thorough than the execution of the second. The reason for this discrepancy lies in the observed work practice as earlier described.

## **Identification of key bottleneck issues**

What quickly emerged from my association with the translation company was the focus of the company's activity, namely the production of technical manuals to a timeline with deadlines, and to standards intentionally superior to those of their Japanese competitors.

### **a) Confirmation of original product quality**

A 10 page sample section of a company produced manual was shown as having a range of flaws: some logical, some linguistic or verbal redundancies, some inappropriate use of technical language, some of poor layout, some simpler ways of saying the same thing. This analysis clearly shocked/surprised the company, as they were rather proud of their product, and had expected more praise than had been forthcoming. This managed to establish that product improvement was possible, indeed necessary. The remaining question was how to do it.

### **b) Improving working method**

In this respect, the company's strengths and weaknesses were identified, slowly but definitely. The strengths were: a large and dedicated workforce with well above average language and translation skills<sup>3)</sup>. The weaknesses were: perhaps because of Japanese cultural norms (silent working conditions being among them) the line by which the final product, the final agreed chapter was reached by discussion of common problem areas, for example by way of a reference or focus group, was conspicuous for being absent. This is latently able to emerge as an important staff development, work practices and consequent product improvement strategy.

### **c) Proofreader's Guidelines**

Another task given was to read and comment on an internal proofreader's guidelines that were ostensibly to be consulted by workers. Here again, some problems were identified. While many of the proofreader's principles and advice were sound, there were some problem areas. One was that the proofreader didn't follow his own advice in writing the guidelines. Another was the fact that the examples used had low relevance to the writers of technical manuals. So the use of examples were in such detail as to prevent an overview of how a section, a process should best be laid out, described and presented. The analysis and discussion highlighted the fact that technical writers used the manual little

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3) One employee had a TOEIC score of 980. The English ability of other employees ranged from very high to medium.

because of perceived low industry relevance.

Conversely, it emerged that translators were not, reluctantly or rarely consulting industry relevant texts such as those listed in the bibliography to this article. This deficiency is seen as an impediment for this company in establishing quality work processes, benchmarks and products.

#### **d) International comparison of Industry Manuals**

Another weakness was seen in the product when compared with a similar manual of different authorship. When we compared the brake detail of a car produced by a company both in the US and Japan and written in Japan (in English) with that of a technical manual concerning the same car but authored in the United States, the comparison was like “night and day”. Why then is energy expended in commissioning two companies to produce a technical manual? This has already been answered by the manufacturer’s pride.

Speaking positively, this comparison, never before undertaken, presents a wonderful opportunity to up-skill the Japanese technical writing staff through workshops that visibly demonstrate the superiority of one writing approach to theirs, and urging them to match the benchmark.

#### **e) Comparison with International How-To Technical Writing Manuals**

What were the weaknesses in the technical writing production process? There was a hiatus between what the company produced and any examples from technical writing manuals widely available in the English-speaking world that characterized industry standards or benchmarks. While the company said that individual writers had access to the odd technical writing manual, the discretion to make use of such texts was individual and non-mandatory.

The absence of collective modeling of best practice through such texts (see bibliography) was identified as a company weakness. I have ordered some texts and it is my intention to offer to run workshops with technical writers based on examples relevant to the company’s work schedule that emanate from globally relevant texts, based on substantial international and industry experience.

### **SWOT Analysis**

The process that we undertook was one of gradual acquaintance of worker and product but with the benefit of being experienced language educators and editors, with the added advantage of being objective outsiders in the sense that they were entirely uncontaminated by the company’s work culture.

To give the company credit where credit is due, the management had a feeling that product improvement was possible, but they were unsure how best to go about that. So their invitation to us was a genuine first step at self-examination. This was undertaken in the hope that further insights and directions would emerge as a result of the collaboration.

This process was slow but effective. One could describe such an approach as a SWOT analysis. This method of strategizing a problem solution involves identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). The other target so identified by a process that has involved several meetings, conversations, reflections and so on, and has not been completed at the time that this article

was written.

## The Way Forward

It is no longer enough to satisfy customers: you must delight them.

Customer Relationship Management, Kotler, 2003

Now that the company and the researchers are comfortable with each other, and have narrowed their differences and increased their mutual understanding, it is time to identify targets, processes and timelines that can be reached by mutual collaboration. That is the agenda of the next phase of collaboration between university and industry.

Concerning processes, there is the view that arguably one of the best ways to assist the company is by conducting workshops that focus on editing, showing improvements, explaining the reasoning and simultaneously developing the staff's English language capabilities. In this way two objectives are achieved: product improvement and staff development.

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