Bridging Gaps
—Notes on Working as a Manga Editor in the United States—

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1. Introduction

When I first joined the editorial department of Yen Press in 2016, it was the latest step in a journey propelled by my life-long interest in manga. I was the president of my high school's anime club, and many years later, I earned a PhD in 2015 at Leiden University researching the emotional aspects of speculative fiction in manga.[1] I have had the opportunity to engage with manga in a variety of capacities: fan, academic, industry professional. As I approach my eighth year in the business, I find that my perspective on editing manga has been informed by my hobbies and academic studies before Yen, my hands-on experience working with the manga themselves, and my consciousness towards the continuously changing nature of both Japanese and American cultures.

Given this, I have decided to describe the way I process the act of "editing manga" through four aspects, with examples as to what challenges come with each. First is understanding how the differences in the Japanese and English languages play out on a textual level. Second is knowing how the art and text elements in manga interact and "flow" into each other, and how this relationship is affected by substituting Japanese for English. Third is the awareness of how manga has become increasingly ubiquitous in the US over time. Fourth is how languages and both the culture and sociopolitical environment around languages can influence change. These are not the only four areas

[1] Li, Carl, "'Normal' Feelings in 'Abnormal' Worlds, On the Political Uses of Emotion in Science Fiction Manga."

I consider, but they are major components.

Note that many of the examples I provide below are hypotheticals based on recurring elements across many books. If not explicitly mentioned, the example is more an amalgamation rather than specifically drawn from one title. Also, because my job has been strictly about Japanese to American English, I can only at best make an educated guess as to how this applies to other languages, even those that are closely related. Additionally, while I bring up elements related to linguistics, I do not have any background in the subject, so any terminology should be taken as more of a professional's informal use rather than by strict academic standards.

2. What Do We Mean by "Manga Editor?"

The title of "manga editor" can mean different things. In Japan, it refers to a person who supports a manga artist in a variety of ways. They give feedback on the details or direction of their artist's work, find work for them, keep them on schedule, create advertising displays in bookstores, and so on. The editor helps bring creators' ideas to fruition, which can include acting as a manager and agent of sorts.

In the US, a manga editor primarily works not with the creators themselves, but with the original finished product. It is our job to coordinate with translators (who adapt the text from Japanese to English) and letterers (who apply the translated text to the page using art and design software) to create a version that aims for both faithfulness to the source material and accessibility for the target audience, with all the challenges that entails. While there are certain skills common to any sort of editor—making sure something reads well, dealing with typos and other obvious errors, and guiding a book through to publication—there are other skills that are emphasized greatly in manga editorial, even compared to other forms of Japanese-to-English adaptation.

3. Translating from Japanese

English manga editors generally do not have to translate from scratch; we have the help of

professional freelancers. Nevertheless, working with manga means having to reconcile the inherent differences in the original and target languages. Puns, culture/history-laden terminology, and massively different grammar structures are some common hurdles to overcome, and there is often no single and objectively correct solution.

The following are a few examples of such difficulties.

- Going from the subject-object-verb word order of Japanese to the subject-verb-object order of English can change what is being emphasized in dialogue.
- The presence of grammatical particles (*wa*, *de*, *ni*, *wo*, etc.) in Japanese can allow sentences and statements to be fragmented yet still readable as a whole, but English readers are not usually trained to think of sentences in the same way.
- Everyday phrases that contain context-sensitive nuances like *otsukaresama* (e.g. "good work," "good-bye," "thanks for the effort you put in") and *yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (e.g. "nice to meet you," "let's help each other out," "please") can be made more difficult to translate if a story purposely utilizes their multiple possible meanings as a form of wordplay.
- Elements of belief systems such as Buddhism and Shintoism might need extra layers of localization because they are nowhere near as prevalent or ingrained in US culture. This can crop up in stories featuring everyday customs, as well as in more fantastical works where Buddhism and Shintoism become the basis for supernatural abilities.
- Something like eating *sekihan* to celebrate either requires an explanation of the custom, a more direct translation of "red rice" or "red beans and rice" that can conjure up an entirely different image,[2] and/or translation notes that might detract from the reading experience by requiring an audience to briefly disconnect from the story.

[2] Red beans and rice is a common staple dish among many different cultures in the US. Additionally, the phrase is a part of US pop culture because of the 1992 song "Baby Got Back" by Sir Mix-A-Lot, where it refers to a diet that can make women more voluptuous.

What I have described thus far is not especially different from any other job requiring working with two languages. However, there are certain aspects that, while not wholly unique to manga, need special attention. In particular, manga editors have to remember the fact that real estate is at a premium, so to speak—we do not have the luxury of virtually unlimited space that a prose editor would.

In manga, a character might make a dramatic statement that is delivered over two or more word balloons, with the final balloon having the biggest impact and emphasizing particular words or phrases for importance, i.e. *Koko ni tatteiru sugata wa / subete wo ushinatta / joō desu* (ここに立っている姿は全てを失った女王です). Here, though, the differences in the languages means that if you translate according to what reads normally in English and partition the text accordingly, different words will often become the focus by the end: *"The figure standing here is… …that of a queen who has… …lost everything."*

Sometimes, restructuring the sentence might make it so awkward as to negatively affect the power of a scene, and it would be better to go with the above while being aware of what gets lost by doing so. Perhaps bolding "queen" can help to draw attention to it despite not being the final word. If this entire moment is contained to a single panel, this can be a fine solution.

But what if that is not the case? What if the line is carried on over multiple panels? Another way to resolve this is by breaking the text differently so that the final balloon at least contains the part originally emphasized along with a greater volume of words. *"The figure standing here… …is that of… …a queen who has lost everything."*

However, there are also cases where the literal size of the word balloons constricts how much space is available. Moreover, this second approach makes the final part more verbose, which can make it sound less powerful. You can rewrite the line so that the final balloon contains the part originally emphasized: *"The figure standing here… …is that of one who has lost everything— A queen!"* If the scene goes across multiple pages and ends on an image of the queen with only one word balloon accompanying her, this can be a good way to ensure that "queen" lands forcefully. The

drawback is that the meaning can start to stray from the original, or what was originally one sentence might have to become two or more. Here, the significance of what has happened to the queen becomes a little disconnected to her status as queen, or might be misread to mean that losing everything is what defines a queen.

Editing manga from Japanese to English means dealing with text and art elements that are constantly in close proximity to each other. This becomes especially important in the next section, where I describe the considerations made when positioning text on the comics pages themselves.

4. Lettering from Japanese

As part of my old PhD research, I looked into common characteristics of how manga-as-comics presents its information to readers, and focused heavily on the concept of *nagare*, or "flow": the way that pages and cascading panels are set up to efficiently guide a reader's eyes from one important element to the next like a river.[3] A word balloon might be placed to encourage a reader to look at a character's body language right after, which can then lead to another panel showing someone else's reaction, and so on. I have brought this way of viewing manga to my work as an editor, but applying it to English editions is rarely as simple as placing text where the Japanese words originally were. There are particular physical limitations imposed by manga that are not as common when translating and localizing other media.

Manga is generally designed around written Japanese, and assumes a rough reading order that takes one's gaze from the upper right of a page to the lower left. However, even though most manga in the US these days is "unflipped," i.e. published like the original Japanese editions without mirroring or rearranging the art, written English itself is inherently a left-to-right language. This means that English reading direction runs counter to the general flow of manga, subtly disrupting the

[3] Li, Carl, "'Normal' Feelings in 'Abnormal' Worlds, On the Political Uses of Emotion in Science Fiction Manga," 76–77.

way a work guides the reader's eyes from panel to panel, and from one visual element to the next. Most art in manga is also laid out with primarily vertical text in mind. This leads to situations where placement of English text for localization can be tricky, and a lot of my work comes from handling this conflict as best as I can.

For example, it is often the case that a close-up of a character's expression precedes a free-floating line of text (that is, without any word balloon surrounding it) conveying their thoughts. Readers thus see their feelings on their face before seeing their thoughts. However, while the Japanese text fits neatly into the space after the facial expression, the English runs into some trouble here.

If you place the text above so as to not obscure the face, then the character's expression no longer leads into the text, and the order of elements in the flow has been reversed. If you reduce the text size to fit, it might become illegible without straining one's vision. If you decide not to shrink it, the words then risk obscuring the face. Another possibility is to tweak the translation to convey the spirit of the text more succinctly, but then you have to decide whether keeping the aesthetics of the reading order is more important than the particular nuances of the original Japanese text. This frequently ends up requiring some middle ground between these options, and just because a particular compromise works in one instance does not necessarily mean it will always be the best choice.

Similarly, because Japanese in manga is written primarily in vertical columns, the pages are often filled with tall and thin word balloons that do not play nicely with the horizontally oriented nature of English. A particularly long word might have to be hyphenated three or four times to fit, which is difficult to read, or might have to be made smaller to fit, taking away some of the impact. Long one-syllable words—such as "strength"—can be a nuisance as well. One solution is to find shorter alternatives (power, might, etc.), but this can affect translation accuracy, readability, and character voice, among other elements. And while English text can be written vertically, it becomes inconvenient to read beyond a couple of words, which makes having a book of entirely vertical text a poor option. Rotating all horizontal text 90 degrees is similarly awkward.

On some level, dealing with these issues has been about swallowing a bitter pill: There is no way to make English flow like Japanese text in a comics format that is not built to accommodate

another language, but editors can mitigate the effect as much as possible while also creating a comfortable experience for English readers.

Dealing with Kanji

I want to draw special attention to the *kanji* characters of written Japanese because I have found it to be an area where the change to English can require an especially great deal of flexibility. While the sheer quanity (as well as the concept of *on* and *kun* readings) has made *kanji* a well-known barrier for those studying Japanese, the challenge of localizing manga can also come from the fact that *kanji* are dense not only with literal meaning but also cultural nuance.

A hero might shout out the name of an attack, composed as a series of *kanji* that takes up a massive amount of page space to emphasize how powerful and amazing it is. For instance, there might be some ability based on the idiom *fūrinkazan* (風林火山),[4] a nice and compact phrase layered with additional meaning. To convey it fully in English by writing out a full translation might mean another case of shrinking text beyond the point of readability. Another solution would be to come up with something shorter and catchier ("Swift, Strong, Fierce, Firm"), though you run the risk of losing meaning that might be relevant in future chapters (perhaps the elemental similes of *fūrinkazan* end up being plot-relevant). The density of meaning present in *kanji* has no real comparable equivalent in English.

Another example of *kanji* difficulty, albeit a less common one is when a four-character compound is written in such a way that each *kanji* is in a different corner of a panel or page. Because the reading order of English is different from Japanese, and also because English readers again are not accustomed to text being broken up in this manner, trying to place the English text in a similar fashion only leads to more confusion. Many times, simply going with one or two lines of text ends up the

[4] *Fūrinkazan* is short for "as fast as the wind, as quiet as the forest, as daring as fire, and immovable as the mountain," though it is literally written as "wind, forest, fire, mountain."

most practical answer.

Forceful Compromise

Being an editor of manga in the US can be thought of as trying to hammer a series of round pegs into square holes, and this applies to both language and visuals. Next, I will be elaborating on how I believe the manga readers have changed.

5. Growth in Readership

As a professional and as a fan, I have noticed a change in manga readers over the past twenty years, but especially since I started working in editorial. Namely, they have grown dramatically in both breadth (the size of the audience itself) and depth (the range of titles that readers at large are willing to accept).

I have seen the increased breadth of manga most readily reflected in two ways. The first is that many people have now grown up in a media landscape that includes manga by default. In my current role as Senior Editor at Yen Press, I have had the opportunity to speak to a number of aspiring editors, and I have noticed how easily available manga has been for them in an official capacity, be it in libraries, in brick-and-mortar stores, or online. Being a prolific manga reader no longer requires an active process of deep excavation, though enthusiasts can still pursue their hobby in this manner.

The second way is that manga and anime have reached a level of undeniable ubiquity. Manga had record highs in the US during the height of the pandemic, with 2021 sales doubling 2020's.[5] And while the following is more anecdotal than rigorous proof, I have simply seen more and more people walking around in everyday settings (as opposed to conventions and other fan-oriented events) proudly wearing manga-themed merchandise—*Naruto*, *Demon Slayer*, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, *Sailor Moon*, etc.

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[5] Mateo, Alex. 2022, "ICv2 Report: U.S. Manga Sales More than Doubled in 2021."

As for greater depth, I find that fans have become more ready and eager to engage with a greater variety of genres and approaches to manga than ever before. It is not simply a matter of readers' ages, but that the increased familiarity of manga has made people more accustomed to the tropes, aesthetics, and types of storytelling.

We see this change at Yen Press, where some of our series have become surprise hits. The occult-focused *Toilet-Bound Hanako-kun* is one of our most successful titles, consistently outperforming even long-beloved franchises in our catalog like *Fruits Basket*. Another Yen Press title, *She Loves to Cook, and She Loves to Eat*, is a food manga about two women who grow closer through a shared bond with cuisine, and which thoughtfully explores the topics of LGBTQA+ sexuality, as well as how women are viewed in Japanese society. Cooking manga has long been an unpopular genre in the US, yet this one receives a great deal of fan praise, with Volume 1 receiving a 4.4 out of 5 on Goodreads from over 1,500 reviewers.[6] A similar effect can be found with the fantasy-themed *Delicious in Dungeon*, which is about cooking and eating monsters in labyrinths, and which has been one of Yen's top selling titles.

In some cases, titles and authors that failed to catch on in previous decades are now actually poster children for manga. One example is *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, which has gone from a niche series enjoyed by few to one so popular that general discussions of manga and anime online assume at least a passing familiarity. A friend of mine, Robert Young (currently the Chair of Illustration at Pennsylvania College of Art and Design), has even mentioned that students at various colleges where he's worked have referred to as *JoJo* as an inspiration for their work. Another example is the horror author, Itō Junji. At a New York Comic Con 2023 panel, Alvin Lu (Kodansha USA CEO and former publisher at VIZ Media) mentioned trying to market Itō back in the 2000s without much success, only to see him now become a viral sensation in the present day.[7] Now, Itō has consistently made appearances on the New York Times Bestsellers List for graphic books and manga.

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[6] See "She Loves to Cook, and She Loves to Eat, Vol. 1 (Volume 1)."

[7] Hassler and Lu, "Manga Publishing in N. America: Past, Present & Future Trends."

This maturation, both literal and metaphorical, has encouraged me to adapt as well. In the process, I find myself taking into account their changing levels of familiarity with manga and elements of Japanese culture.

The Effects of an Expanded Readership on Manga Editorial

Because there are more people who have grown up with manga, and are increasingly accustomed to various approaches to it, I have to think about the possibility that readers have a greater amount of default knowledge. For instance, the increasing prominence of horror and occult manga has made me wonder whether *yōkai* names are better off localized or untranslated when they appear in stories. I personally have taken each approach on *yōkai*-related books, sometimes even using both on the same title, such as in the manga *Studio Apartment, Good Lighting, Angel Included*: *yuki onna* is "snow lady" but *kappa* remains named as such.[8]

However, while the readership has expanded and matured, there are still limits. In my description of the breadth of manga fandom, it is not a coincidence that most are *shōnen* battle series (the most popular style), which still dominate how people perceive manga. Similarly, while food manga like the above-mentioned titles are doing well, they still tend to couch the culinary theme in something that resonates more with US readers, like LGBTQA+ subject matter or a dungeon-crawling fantasy setting.

Crucially, although there may be more people who know about aspects of Japanese society and culture, that certainly does not account for every potential reader, and it is important to at least attempt to strike a balance between those who know more and those who know less. One reader might have zero knowledge of Japan outside of sushi and ninja. Another might be familiar with anime and manga tropes but not much else. And while those with extensive knowledge should rightfully be considered the exception, they also cannot be wholly discounted.

I believe the goal of adapting manga to other languages is to offer readers in the target

[8] Matoba, *Studio Apartment, Good Lighting, Angel Included*.

language a comparable experience to what Japanese readers theoretically experience while being aware that this is not 100% achievable. Even if we were to falsely assume that there could be a singular Japanese experience and a singular English experience, it is impossible to fully connect the two. Nevertheless, shortening that gap is important.

6. Cultural Changes in Motion

The last major component of my work as a manga editor comes from the fact that culture and norms transform over time, and this brings about changes to the words we use. What was once standard slang might now be considered outdated or even inappropriate.

On many occasions, I have had to ask my coworkers (many of whom are younger than me) a question: "Would a high schooler say this?" It can be an aging experience to realize that what I have regarded as common slang is now in the same category as "the bee's knees," but I must think about how the use of older vernacular affects readers. Having 2020s teen characters talking like they came out of the 1980s can potentially jar someone out of their experience.

On the other hand, using slang that is too current can date a work in the long-term. It can be fun and educational to read an older work from a couple decades ago and see an attempt at contemporary parlance now sound awkward. And with social media and other forms of interaction greatly accelerating the life cycle of slang, it does not take long for a currently trendy phrase to quickly fall out of fashion.

Sometimes, these choices are not just about what sounds "contemporary" but also about the way words are viewed differently due changes in cultures. When I started as an editor, I had some idea of the issues with "ableist language"—that certain terms, even seemingly acceptable ones, can be either directly or indirectly pejorative towards people with disabilities. Over time, I have lessened my use of it with the idea that manga should not make a reader feel like their circumstances are being maligned, but I also need to remember that this sentiment has not yet permeated Japanese or English to the point of being anywhere near universal.

Every so often, I will receive notes from proofreaders asking if a term such as "crazy" should be avoided for being ableist. And sometimes, because there is nothing in the original Japanese to explicitly indicate mental health, I have tried to find alternative translations. *Yabai* is a common case, as it roughly maps onto how "crazy" is typically used in English, carrying either a positive or negative connotation depending on context. But I also believe that there is no hard and fast rule for when to make this change, simply because "crazy" is still used commonly in everyday English conversation among people young and old. Attempts to avoid the word entirely can end up making things sound more awkward, especially when there is not much space in a balloon or panel.

And in some cases, the manga in question features characters specifically calling someone insane using words like *kyōki* ("crazy") and *menhera* (a modified loan word, or *wasei eigo*, stands for "mental healther"). Even if one can reasonably argue that these terms are inappropriate regardless of what language it is, they are ultimately in the source material and sometimes intended to carry a negative meaning. To remove them would be to substantially alter the story.

Different Approaches to LGBTQA+ Content

On occasion, other editors and I will be tasked with LGBTQA+ manga that contain phrases in the Japanese text which might be considered offensive in English. The answer we arrive at depends on the work. For example, in some instances, the words used might be considered acceptable among LGBTQA+ communities in Japan, but not so much in English. These manga are generally not aiming to be hurtful, but too direct a translation could make it as such. Generally, the solution here is to find equivalents that can get the meaning across without making readers feel like their identity is being attacked.

However, there are also cases where the slurs are actually part of the story. For example, there are manga with characters living in environments where discrimination against them is normalized or they might have a degree of internalized homophobia. A manga might even be set in a time and place where the epitaphs are explicitly in English, and their cruelty is a part of the story itself. In situations like this, we have typically kept the offensive language but usually provide a

written content warning to explain the context of why they have been included. The intent is to be faithful to the original work but still provide sufficient notice and preparation for those who might be uncomfortable with the vocabulary regardless.

Languages are not spoken in proverbial vacuums, nor are they frozen in time. They interact and transform just as the world does. I try to remember this, remaining confident that I have the skills to navigate this complexity while being open to change.

7. Conclusion

In my work as a manga editor in the US, I have found four areas of focus that I need to consider when facilitating the localization of a title. These are translation hurdles, limitations on lettering, a readership whose breadth and depth of exposure to manga continues to grow, and the fact that both the Japanese and English languages are ever-changing.

With text translation, the challenge comes from having to work with two languages whose grammar, vocabulary, and cultural assumptions are very different. In the specific context of manga, rewriting can sometimes be necessary if an editor wants to have a moment hit with the right emotional weight, but it can come at the cost of translation accuracy in order to emphasize visual synergy.

Similarly, when it comes to lettering, the page itself forces text into physical limitations that don't affect many other works adapted from Japanese to English. The upper-right to lower-left text flow of Japanese in manga tends to result in art and pages that take this order to be the default; the presence of skinny word balloons and panels with narrow spaces for text are two prominent examples of this assumption. While a completely smooth reading flow is challenging to achieve, editors can at least mitigate the impact.

It is also important to remember that the ongoing presence of manga has made an impact on generations of people. The readership has become larger in the seven years that I have been in manga editorial, and even more when looking at the past 10-20 years, thanks to manga becoming more easily accessible and commonplace (and thanks to a pandemic that forced everyone indoors). This, in turn,

has made it possible to publish manga titles that have been tough sells in the US market in decades past—readers have become more receptive to more challenging works. At the same time, one can easily fall into a trap and alienate readers of all ages who simply might not be familiar with cultural or storytelling tropes of manga and its surrounding subcultures.

It is also necessary to understand that languages are organic, and the way words are developed and used will not necessarily remain static. English itself is in the midst of major changes as people examine and criticize the way words have the power to harm marginalized people. The decision to push for more inclusive language can be a boon to increasing readership, but it may not necessarily agree with the content of the work itself, be it in specific word choices, overarching values conveyed, or even what is considered "entertaining."

Thus, working on manga means trying to balance many different values to convey the spirit and meaning of a work as accurately as possible while also cognizant of the fact that this fit will be imperfect. There is often no single right answer to a problem, and adaptation of a work to a different language and culture necessarily can require compromise in one or more areas. Nevertheless, I find it important to strive toward an unattainable ideal, even if the outcome would be different in the hands of another editor. As long as we are professional in our respect for the authors and artists; the readers; the translators and letterers and others we work with; and the languages themselves, we can put our best foot forward while improving.

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