**Between the lines: additional tasks that editors must perform when dealing with academic manuscripts by non-native speakers of English**

Brian Harrison  
Faculty of Policy Studies, Chuo University

The links between Australia and Japan are growing increasingly close. By 2001, nearly 300,000 Australians were studying Japanese, with 96.6% of these in primary or secondary school (Negishi-Wood 2001); by 2002, Japanese was being taught in almost one-third of Australian schools (Mackerras 2002). Many of these students are now entering, or soon will enter, the job market and it seems likely that a number of them will have careers which will involve Japan. In the translation and editorial field, it is likely that an increasing number of Australians will deal with Japanese authors.

On the Japanese side, for many years the number of research articles submitted to international journals has increased. To take the example of the medical field, by 1980 the number of English articles published by Japanese authors was already more than the total in English in each of Australia, New Zealand or Canada (Maher 1986) and the number of published articles listed on the prestigious MEDLINE database has continued to increase substantially ever since. Furthermore, I was part of a group that recently published the results of a national survey of 45 medical journals in Japan which revealed that editors believed the current pressures on Japanese researchers to publish in English is continuing to intensify (Harrison et al 2006).

It thus seems reasonable to assume that in the future there will be more and more editorial contacts between Australia and Japan, which makes the accurate transmission of information increasingly important.

Although the following discussion focuses on my experiences with Japanese authors over the past 25 years, many of the points would undoubtedly also apply to authors from other countries, especially from East Asia.

Japanese suffer from a number of handicaps when writing in English. There are some fundamental differences between Japanese and western languages (this is further discussed below), and Japanese is often used in a rather vague manner, which authors then tend to replicate in English. The difficulties are compounded by the general education system in Japan, which tends to omit instruction in organizational concepts, logical development and the acquisition of critical thinking skills.

One area which often requires editorial improvement concerns structural changes. This can arise because Japanese writing has its origins in Chinese poetry, in which there is often a sudden shift to an associated but apparently unrelated topic (Connor 1996). This can of course be quite disconcerting to a native English speaker, who expects a deductive style of writing in which the writer tries to have their argument accepted by the reader. The structured changes to which I referred can arise at different levels – the overall manuscript level, the paragraph level, and the sentence level. When significant changes are deemed necessary, it is highly advisable to check with the author that the amendments do indeed reflect the intended meaning.

The potentially most serious errors can occur when mother tongue interference leads to the production of a text which at first sight appears to be perfectly acceptable (correct spelling, accurate grammar, and seemingly correct meaning), but where in fact the meaning is different from the meaning intended by the author. Below are examples of the types of errors that can occur, and possible remedial strategies:

**General grammar**

* Japanese generally does not distinguish between singular and plural. Try to imagine whether the text meaning would be significantly altered if singulars were replaced by plurals, and vice versa. If you suspect there may be errors, check with the author.
* Japanese does not have definite or indefinite articles. Try to imagine whether the text meaning would be significantly altered if ‘a’ were replaced by ‘the’ (or even omitted), and vice versa. If you suspect there may be errors, check with the author.

**Specific words that cause problems**

* *ijou*. Example = 3 *ijou*. Meaning = ‘more than 3’ **or** ‘3 or more’  
  If undetected, a mistranslation here can cause serious problems in science or business etc. Check with the author, but be careful about how you phrase questions. Do not ask ‘Do you mean “more than 3” or “3 or more”?’ as this may merely perpetuate the problem. Try to think of ways to ask such a question so as to ensure that no misunderstandings can occur. For example, ask ‘Do you mean “4, 5, 6 …?” or do you mean “3, 4, 5, 6…?”’. [Similar comments apply to the word ‘*ika*’, with ‘3 *ika*’ meaning either ‘less than 3’ or ‘3 or less’].
* Prepositions can cause confusion, e.g. the possessive ‘*no*’ may fail to distinguish between who is the possessor and who or what is the possessed. For example, ‘*Taro no ojisan*’ (Taro is a boy’s name) can mean either ‘Taro’s uncle’ or ‘My uncle, whose name is Taro’.
* The preposition ‘*ni*’ can be a major source of errors as it has multiple meanings e.g. at, on, into, to, towards, etc. This can cause major problems when describing locations or directions (e.g. when describing a surgical technique). Check meanings with the author, preferably using diagrams if the meaning is critical.
* *nado*. Dictionaries give the meaning as ‘such as’ or ‘etc’. However, the dictionaries usually fail to mention that the word is often used for another purpose. Without providing any literal meaning, it is used to make the end of a sentence less abrupt. You may need to confirm with an author whether ‘etc.’ does indeed imply an extended list.
* When you come across noun compounds (i.e. where nouns are strung together, with the preceding one(s) acting as an adjective), try to imagine whether the relationship between the various nouns is indicated correctly – errors can often occur.

**Details may need to be added to the text**

* To aid understanding, it may be necessary to add extra details to make the logic more readily understandable (something Japanese are often weak at).
* To prevent misunderstanding, it may be necessary to add some additional background information, which may be obvious to Japanese but not so to people unfamiliar with Japan. For example, a text about the results of a survey which discusses lung cancer rates amongst full-time employees in Japan is better with a comment that although lifetime employment may be common in large Japanese institutions (a well-known fact), care must be exercised when dealing with data for women, since many women end their careers by age 30 (a fact that is not well known). Lack of knowledge of such a fact could lead to serious misinterpretation of the survey results.
* Japanese terms may not be familiar to non-Japanese; in this case, additional background must be added.  
  [Specific examples of these have been published elsewhere. See Harrison 2002].

**Readability**

* A text can often be made much more readable by the appropriate insertion of words that signal the relationship between the preceding and subsequent sections of the text (e.g. ‘in contrast’). Japanese are often weak in this area. Similarly, it may be necessary to alter word order so that the key topic of a sentence is immediately clear to a reader.

**Oral presentations and poster sessions**

Even editors primarily concerned with written manuscripts may receive requests for help with oral presentations and poster sessions. Too often, Japanese tend to fail to grasp that the visual element is important and merely ‘cut and paste’ from a written paper into a slide etc. It may be necessary to remove unnecessary grammar etc, split the information into small segments, and arrange it in the slide/poster with careful use of blank space to improve the visual impression.

**Requests for changes in manuscripts**

Make requests as precise as possible, and do not use colloquial or idiomatic expressions. Unclear requests may not be understood correctly. Try to help the non-native speaker by providing as much information as possible – even when the request is understood, Japanese can have trouble understanding how to respond properly. Examples of comments that could be improved are:

* ‘The text is too long’ – Try to indicate which sections could be shortened.
* ‘More citations are needed’ – Try to indicate where this is especially necessary (e.g. list the page and line numbers).
* ‘Improve the English’ – Try to indicate the types of linguistic problems that need to be addressed. Note – please add such a comment only if it is true. Too often, an editor may see a Japanese name as the author and then insert such a comment as a knee-jerk reaction – but remember that the text may already have been revised by a knowledgeable native English speaker.

**Cover letters**

Make statements as clear as possible, and do not use colloquial or idiomatic expressions. Make it crystal clear whether a paper has been accepted, rejected, or merely needs revisions. Even a statement such as ‘The paper is not acceptable in its present form’ could cause problems, with the Japanese author thinking that their paper has been rejected. It could be improved by writing e.g. ‘Although the paper is not acceptable in its present form, we feel that it can probably be published if you make the following revisions’.

**Further resources for Japanese medical researchers**

We (B. Harrison, J.P. Barron, H. Kobayashi, and E. Harrison) published a series of three books in Japanese that attempt to cover all the ways a Japanese medical researcher may need to use English in their career. The English equivalent of the series title is ‘Medical English Communication’. The Japanese title is　‘*Igaku Eigo Komyunikeeshon*’, and is published by Asakura Shoten. [I was first author, and my name in Japanese is written as ‘*Harisun*’].

* *Igaku eigo komyunikeeshon 1: ronbun no kakikata kihonhen* (Medical English Communication 1: Writing manuscripts – Basic techniques). Asakura Shoten (Tokyo, Japan). May 2003. (140 pages). (In Japanese)
* *Igaku eigo komyunikeeshon 2: ronbun no kakikata ouyouhen* (Medical English Communication 2: Writing manuscripts – Advanced techniques). Asakura Shoten (Tokyo, Japan). May 2003. (151 pages). (In Japanese)
* *Igaku eigo komyunikeeshon 3: ronbun no kakikata ouyouhen* (Medical English Communication 3: Submission and presentation). Asakura Shoten (Tokyo, Japan). May 2003. (151 pages). (In Japanese)

One of the co-authors of the book (Professor J.P.Barron) arranged with a pharmaceutical company to put up a detailed explanation of how to write papers in English on a special website. He gives the explanations orally in Japanese, and the website is free to all users without registration (the URL is[**www.ronbun.jp**](http://www.ronbun.jp/)).

**References**

Connor U. (1996) *Contrastive rhetoric: cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 41-45.

Harrison B. (2002) Japanese research papers: the advisability of translators performing a proactive editing role. *European Science Editing* 28(4): 104-107.

Harrison B, Barron JP, Iijima K, Breugelmans R, Yamamoto K. (2006) A survey of medical journal publishing in Japan: language of publication and trends in publishing formats. *European Science Editing* 32(2): 39-42.

Mackerras C. (2002) [**The study of Asian languages in Australian schools.**](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2002/552983.htm) May 11th, 2002. Accessed Feb. 25th, 2003.

Maher JC. (1986) The development of English as an international language of medicine. *Applied Linguistics* 7(2):206-218.

Negishi-Wood N. (2001) Overview of Japanese language education in Australian schools. *The Breeze Quarterly* No. 24, Fall 2001 (Japan Foundation).