

## NIHON VAI AO OESTE

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## NIHON GOES WEST: EXPLORING THE NON-TRANSLATION OF HONORIFICS IN THE ENGLISH SUBTITLES OF A JAPANESE VIDEO GAME

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**Abstract:** Japan has a long tradition when it comes to graphic novels, animated series, films, and, more recently, video games. This popularity has gained international attention in recent decades, creating a market for Japanese-to-English translation. An example of such translations is the localized version of the video game *Yakuza 0*. Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Lawrence Venuti in his footsteps, argue that there are fundamentally two ways of translating: domestication and foreignization. However, what we find in the translation of *Yakuza 0* is a hybrid way of working, which demonstrates that the issue is not as black and white. This paper focuses on the aforementioned game to draw examples and discuss the impact of honorifics on socio-cultural markers and relationship dynamics. First, an overview of the Japanese system of honorific characters is provided in order to understand why translators would choose to retain them in their subtitles. Second, we aim to discuss possible factors that lead translators and localization professionals to retain honorifics in their translation. Finally, we contribute to the broader discussion of ideological and cultural factors that influence the dynamics between source and target culture, by pointing to possible shifts in this relationship, in view of Venuti's critique of Anglo-American translation.

**Keywords:** Translation; Domestication and Foreignization; Japanese Culture; Honorifics



## NIHON VAI AO OESTE: EXPLORANDO A NÃO-TRADUÇÃO DE HONORÍFICOS NA LEGENDA EM INGLÊS DE UM JOGO DIGITAL JAPONÊS

**Resumo:** O Japão tem uma longa tradição quando se trata de histórias em quadrinhos, séries e filmes animados e, mais recentemente, jogos digitais. Esta popularidade ganhou atenção internacional nas últimas décadas, criando um mercado para traduções do Japonês para o Inglês. Um exemplo é a versão localizada do jogo digital *Yakuza 0*. Friedrich Schleiermacher, e Lawrence Venuti na mesma direção, argumentam que existem, fundamentalmente, duas formas de tradução: domesticação e estrangeirização. Contudo, o que encontramos na tradução de *Yakuza 0* é uma forma híbrida de tradução, o que demonstra que a questão não é unívoca. Este artigo foca no mencionado jogo digital para traçar exemplos e discutir o impacto dos honoríficos nos marcadores socioculturais e nas dinâmicas de relacionamento. Em primeiro lugar, este artigo fornece uma visão geral do sistema japonês de caracteres honoríficos, a fim de compreender por que razão os tradutores optariam por mantê-los nas legendas em inglês. Em segundo lugar, o nosso objetivo é discutir possíveis fatores que levariam os tradutores e profissionais de localização a reter estes títulos honoríficos na sua tradução. Finalmente, contribuímos para a discussão mais ampla dos fatores ideológicos e culturais que influenciam a dinâmica entre a cultura de origem e a cultura de destino, apontando para possíveis mudanças nesta relação, levando em conta a crítica de Venuti à tradução anglo-americana.

**Keywords:** Tradução; Domesticação e Estrangeirização; Cultura Japonesa; Honoríficos

### Introduction

For fans and connoisseurs, the impact of Japanese media on the Anglo-Saxon world is irrefutable. Video game sales in the US rose from \$3.2 billion in 1995 to \$6.9 billion in 2002, with games developed in Japan largely responsible for this increase (Kohler, 2016). Similarly impressive is the consumption of equally Japanese

anime and manga<sup>1</sup>. According to Goto-Jones (2009), anime accounts for 60% of animated television produced worldwide, while manga sales had already reached six-figure numbers by the early 2000s, causing a spike in new users looking for these titles in their local US libraries (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006).

The popularity of Japanese media in the West made translating from Japanese into English an exciting field for research. According to Josephy-Hernández (2017), several large translation houses are operating in the US today, employing around sixty people. While this number may not seem so impressive, translation houses in Japan, for instance, employ an average of four to five people.

In the context of the English translation and localization of Japanese media, an interesting phenomenon can be observed in video games, manga, and anime: the practice of leaving intact suffixes used by Japanese speakers to address and refer to others. That this also happens in subtitles of audiovisual media is intriguing, given the rapid interaction between text and reader. In a book or essay, such choices are easily justifiable, while notes can elaborate on the text's sociolinguistic aspects. With subtitles, however, this is usually not possible.<sup>2</sup> The translator has to adhere to strict guidelines regarding the number of characters. The reader receives the translator's work with no further information or context.

First, this article provides an overview of the Japanese system of honorifics to understand why translators would choose to keep them in the target language subtitles. Second, we want to discuss possible factors that lead translators and localization professionals to keep

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<sup>1</sup> "Anime" is a term commonly used for Japanese animated series and movies, while "manga" is the term used for printed Japanese graphic novels.

<sup>2</sup> There is one notable exception: in unofficial subtitles of anime made by fans, translator notes often appear on screen to justify the translator's particular choice or provide context regarding a particular term they may consider culturally or linguistically relevant or hard to translate. Unrestricted by guidelines of professional translation, this practice has become infamous within the anime community for the numerous examples of translator's notes considered by fans unnecessary, amusing, or visually disruptive (see Josephy-Hernández, 2017).

these honorifics in their translation of audiovisual media. Finally, we want to contribute to the broader discussion of ideological and cultural factors that influence the dynamics between source and target cultures by pointing out possible shifts in this relationship, in view of Venuti's (1995) criticism of translations in the Anglo-American world.

While there is no shortage of examples of Japanese honorifics in English translations (popular anime such as *Komi Can't Communicate*, *My Hero Academia*, *Free!* and *Ore Monogatari*, the *Persona* video game series, and the classic art-house film *In the Realm of the Senses*), this paper focuses on the 2015 action video game *Yakuza 0* to draw examples and discuss the impact of honorifics on socio-cultural markers and relationship dynamics. This game was chosen for two reasons: it presents many occurrences of the phenomenon in question, with several examples in different contexts, and it is deeply embedded in complex socio-cultural dynamics, systems, and institutions that permeate Japanese social relations which reflects in the localized subtitling of the game. Despite the choice to keep certain linguistic and cultural aspects unfamiliar to English-speaking players, the English localization of the game, released in 2017, was likely one reason for the popularity of the series, previously believed to be difficult to sell to a Western audience (Yakuza Wiki, 2015).

This paper focuses on the instances of Japanese honorifics in English sentences. The terms searched for were *san* さん, *han* はん, *sama* 様, *chan* ちゃん, and *kun* 君. Their meanings are explained in the next section. The use of these terms was analyzed in relation to their function and the meaning by leaving these words untranslated.

We looked at Schleiermacher's translation methods, Venuti's writings on the translator's invisibility, the influence of social and cultural aspects on translations in the Anglosphere, and at linguistic studies on the Japanese honorifics system. The data was examined to find out why the translators of the text had chosen this approach and what it revealed about socio-cultural and ideological issues in audiovisual translation.

The article comprises six parts: the introduction is followed by a section that briefly describes the history, function, and purpose of honorifics in Japanese, focusing on their influence on social divisions and interpersonal relations. The third section examines Schleiermacher's classic essay *On the different methods of translating* and its influence on Venuti's concepts of domestication, foreignization, and the invisibility of the translator. The fourth section examines how honorifics are used in context to convey meaning, using examples from the English subtitles of *Yakuza 0*. The fifth section discusses domestication and foreignization within the context of translation from Japanese into English. The final section provides concluding remarks.

### **Politeness and the honorifics system: “one’s proper place”**

The Japanese language is rich in linguistic variation that depends on social context, status, and intricate dynamics between speakers. A system of honorifics distinguishes between different contexts: informal, polite, or formal (Feely, Hasler & Gispert, 2019). The morphemes used indicate the social position of the listener in relation to the speaker. These are referred to as ‘terms of address and reference’ (Wenger, 1982). These morphemes are suffixes added to proper names according to the structure Proper name + suffix (e.g., Tanaka-san, Akiyama-kun, Makoto-chan). In addition, Wenger (1982) explains that they can be linked to given names, surnames, or kinship terms. He divides these suffixes into two groups. The first group cannot stand alone and must be attached to another term (such as san *さん* or sama *様*). The second consists of words that can be used as stand-alone terms of address and reference (*sensei* *先生* and *senpai* *先輩*, for instance).

Their meaning and use vary based on the relationship between individuals, their gender, age, level of intimacy, or social status within a particular setting, such as family, school, or workplace.

Pizziconi explains the importance of honorifics in social life on many different levels:

As isolatable linguistic forms, stereotypically associated with notions of deference, social ranking and demeanour, they facilitate explicit metapragmatic reasoning, the creation of reflexive models of social behaviour, discourses of appropriateness, and even language policies that target issues of morality and civic education (Pizziconi, 2011, p. 70).

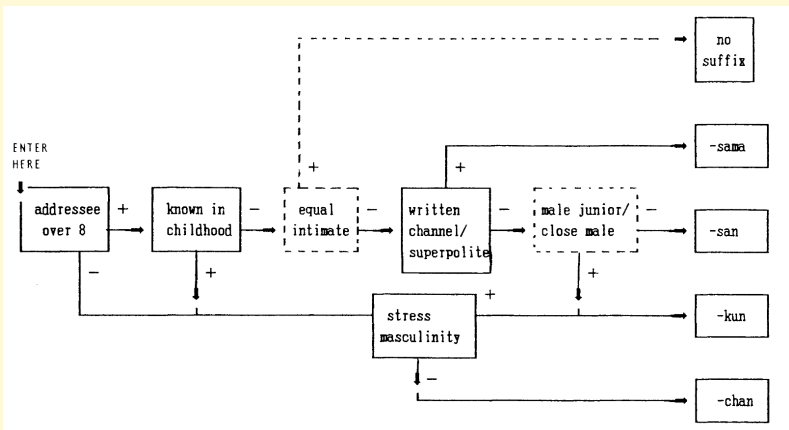
The table below lists common honorifics from the first group. This list is not exhaustive. Speakers use various other terms in more specific contexts. Wenger (1982) and Loveday (1986) suggest some common uses of these terms. It should be noted that whether these suffixes are attached to surnames, first names, or kinship terms may change their implications.

**Table 1:** Common terms of address and reference

Honorific	Romanization	Common use
さん	san	The standard term of address. Approximate to the use of Mr./Ms. in English
はん	han	Variation of <i>san</i> (Kansai dialects)
様	sama	Extreme politeness. It may be used in relation to divine beings or on very formal occasions
君	kun	Typically stresses masculinity, especially for young children or juniors
ちゃん	chan	Denotes cuteness. Commonly used for babies and girls.

The use of the correct term is based on the social proximity between speaker and addressee. The flowchart in figure 1 (Loveday, 1986), although simplified, highlights the complexity of the use of terms of address and reference, taking into consideration age, level of intimacy, hierarchy, gender, and communication channel. As the author points out, age, gender, and relationships of inferiority/superiority are “fundamental themes of Japanese social organization.” (Loveday, 1986, p. 7)

**Picture 1:** Use of honorific terms of address and reference in social contexts



Source: Loveday (1986).

Although honorifics constitute a complex system that affects the structure of the Japanese language in many ways, this article is concerned only with terms of address and reference belonging to the first group as described by Wenger (cannot be used as stand-alone words), such as those shown in the table and figure above. Other honorifics (such as *desu* です and *masu* ます, which are attached to adjective and verb bases) are rarely left intact in the English subtitles of Japanese media.



Honorifics are part of the Japanese politeness system, as they express a position of submission and respect essential to Japan's social dynamics. Being polite, as Holmes points out, “means getting the linguistic expression of social distance right as far as your addressee is concerned” (Holmes, 2012, p. 288).

Haugh & Obana (2011) explain that the study of honorifics has a long history in Japanese academia, traditionally approached from the perspective of *kokugogaku* 国語学, the study of the national language, which focuses on the classification of honorifics and their function. The study of honorifics has a long history from before the concept of ‘politeness’ was even considered in linguistics (Pizziconi, 2011) and honorifics have only recently been explored in politeness studies. It is mentioned by the authors of the Edo period (AD 1603-1887) when Neo-Confucianism was adopted as the State's official ideology (Haugh & Obana, 2011).

According to Hane (1991), Confucian ideology, which emphasizes knowing one's place in society, was used by the ruling class to justify the division of Japanese society into four main classes (samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants). In this context, the concept of *tachiba* 躰, “the place where one stands”, is essential to the dynamics of politeness and the use of honorifics in Japanese, as it “can account for a broad range of normative politeness behaviors” (Haugh & Obana, 2011, p. 148).

According to Haugh and Obana (2011), there is evidence that the relationship between Confucian ideology and honorifics dates back at least to the early 17th century, as evidenced by *Arte da lingoa de Iapam*, written in 1608 by João Rodrigues, a Portuguese missionary and linguist who described the use of honorifics in Japanese readings of Confucius. Confucian ideology remained prominent in Japanese society until the mid-20th century, and its influence is still felt today in daily interactions. Recent reports on politeness and etiquette in Japanese society have therefore associated honorifics with the concept of *tachiba*.

The use of terms of address and reference in Japanese society is complex. It is the legacy of centuries of history and ideology

imposed by the elite and informed by the dominant philosophy in the Japanese empire. Translators of Japanese have a particularly difficult task when they have to translate into a language where there is no such complexity of honorifics. As Pizziconi states, “[u]sers of Japanese or other honorific-rich languages are not necessarily more ‘socially sensitive’, but they are likely to be more sensitive to the way in which social relations and social reality are created and transformed by linguistic signs.” (Pizziconi, 2011, p. 70)

With that in mind, the question remains: how does one make the dynamics in honorific languages explicit in translations targeted at speakers of non-honorific languages? The following section will look at this from the perspective of Translation Studies.

### **Translation and cultural awareness**

In his essay *On the different methods of translating*, Schleiermacher (2012) describes two approaches to the art of translation: how to bridge the gap between the original author and the readers of the translated text. As known, the author distinguishes two approaches: “Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him” (Schleiermacher, 2012, p. 49). The first approach compensates for the readers’ lack of knowledge of the source language by trying to give them the same impression that the translator had when reading the original text, thus putting the reader in a ‘foreign’ position. The second approach involves putting the author in the same universe as the reader, as if the author had written in the target language. Snell-Hornby (2012) points out that although, in Schleiermacher’s view, the first approach is preferable, both alternatives are equally valid. However, the two possible solutions to the problem are so inherently opposed that there seems to be no other option but to pick one and follow it strictly, since an attempt to combine the two methods will not bring the writer and the reader closer.

Schleiermacher's essay has been very influential in Translation Studies, as many successors have revised his assumptions. Venuti has cited Schleiermacher as an influence on his approach to ethics in the case of Anglo-American translation. Venuti's work highlights that the context in which a translation is produced and received is not devoid of a cultural and political agenda. Focusing on translation into English, he explored the factors that led to specific translations being better received due to their 'fluency', lacking linguistic or stylistic elements that would estrange the reader. This creates the impression that the translated text is not a translation, but the original. In this process, the translator becomes "invisible" so as to minimize the foreign aspects of the target text (Munday, 2016).

Venuti applies the terms "domestication" and "foreignization" to distinguish these two contrasting approaches, both of which reveal different ethical attitudes toward foreign languages and cultures:

Seen from the perspective of socio-textual practices, domestication means negotiating the discursive, generic and textual designs of the source text in terms of target language norms and conventions. Foreignization, on the other hand, means negotiating these values in terms of source language norms and conventions (Hatim, 1999, p. 214).

Within the English-speaking literary world, Venuti advocates foreignization as a highly politicized practice that seeks to resist the hegemony of English "and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others" (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). Foreignization is as a tool against ethnocentrism, racism, and imperialism:

If, as Schleiermacher believed, a foreignizing translation method can be useful in building a national culture, forging a foreign-based cultural identity for a linguistic community

about to achieve political autonomy, it can also undermine any concept of nation by challenging cultural canons, disciplinary boundaries, and national values in the target language (Venuti, 1995, p. 100).

Munday (2016), on the other hand, emphasizes that domestication and foreignization are a continuum, not a binary. A translation can vary in degrees of domestication/ foreignization. The dichotomy diverges from Schleiermacher's concept. The German author did not believe it possible to reconcile the two at the risk of producing a substandard translation that would not achieve its goal of uniting reader and writer. In any case, Venuti's writings recenter the issue raised much earlier by Schleiermacher. The translator's choice to give priority to the writer or to the reader in the effort to unite the two parties is informed by ideology:

Admitting (with qualifications like "as much as possible") that translation can never be completely adequate to the foreign text, Schleiermacher allowed the translator to choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad (Venuti, 1995, p. 20).

Venuti's understanding of Schleiermacher's words, however, has been questioned. Snell-Hornby (2012) points out that terms such as "ethnocentric reduction" and "ethnodeviant pressure" do not appear in the essay or its translation into English. After analyzing the writings of both authors, she concludes that the words Venuti attributes to Schleiermacher do not necessarily relate to the points the former made in his classic essay. Instead, she points to what she sees as Venuti's incoherence. Although his own theory is critical of ethnocentric reductions, he has "domesticated"

Schleiermacher's concept by transforming it into an “excessively visible” translator.

Snell-Hornby is not alone in criticizing Venuti's concepts. Hatim questions what he perceives as a lack of research methodology. He also mentions problems that other authors have with Venuti's work: Baker (qtd. in Hatim, 1999), for instance, is critical of the over-politicized nature of Venuti's approach, as she believes it suggests that the objectionable aspects of ideology are deliberate and calculated.

Regardless of its possible shortcomings, Venuti's work has had an undeniable impact on Translation Studies, and it is especially relevant when discussing translation in the Anglo-American sphere. According to Hatim & Munday (2019), it can be viewed within what Snell-Hornby (1990) has called the “cultural turn” in Translation Studies, the point at which discussions and studies in the field shifted from a linguistic perspective to a cultural, political, and ideological approach. As such, discussions of how ideology — in Mason's (1994, p. 25) definition, “the set of beliefs and values which inform an individual's or institution's view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts, etc.” — can inform translator choices have emerged in the field. The following section examines the English subtitles of the video game *Yakuza 0*, taking into account the concepts described so far.

### **Honorifics in English subtitles**

To examine the phenomenon discussed in this article, this section analyzes the English subtitles of the video game *Yakuza 0* in relation to the localization team's decision to leave terms of address and reference in the English version of the game. The game was directed by Kazuki Hosokawa and written by Masayoshi Yokoyama. It was developed by Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio and released by Sega in 2015 in Japan and in 2017 in North America and Europe. Scott Strichart led the localization team for the English version. *Yakuza*

*0* is the sixth main installment in the *Yakuza* series, known in its country of origin as *Ryū ga Gotoku* 龍が如く. The series' official Wiki (2015) describes the game's setting:

*Yakuza 0* is set in Japan's bubble era, a period of extremely high property prices in Japan during the second half of the 1980s; it takes place from December 1988 to January 1989. The game's two principal locations are Kamurocho, Tokyo, and Sotenbori, Osaka. These locations are fictionalized versions of Kabukicho, Tokyo, and Dotonbori, Osaka, respectively (Yakuza Wiki, 2015).

It tells the story of two young men: Kazuma Kiryu and Goro Majima, former Yakuza members. After leaving the organization (Kiryu for being framed for a murder he did not commit and Majima for insubordination), the two become entangled in a plot involving several rival factions within the criminal organization, which seek to gain control of the fictional Kamurocho area of Tokyo. The game features the customs and habits of the infamous Yakuza, as well as other aspects of life in Japan, especially during the 1980s, in Tokyo and Osaka.

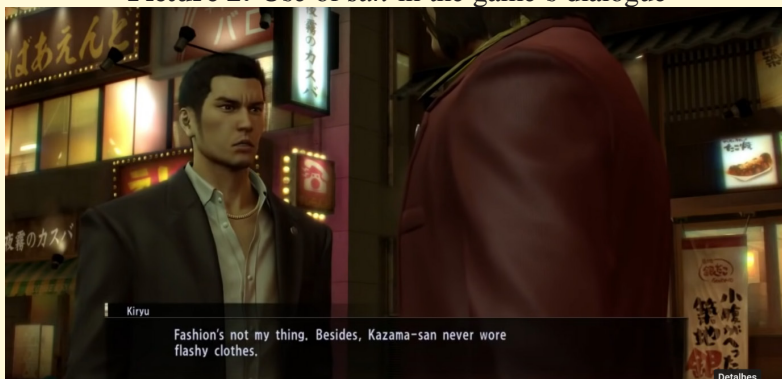
The English subtitles were extracted from the Windows PC version of the video game, released in 2018 (this title was originally a *PlayStation* exclusive). We explored the use of the honorifics *san* さん, *han* はん, *sama* 様, *chan* ちゃん, and *kun* 君 that had remained in the English version of the game. Only dialogues related to the game's main story were considered. Side stories and other additional material were not. Table 2 shows how many instances of each term were found. Some of the lines containing terms of address and reference are transcribed here, followed by a brief analysis of their meaning and function within the story and the broader context of Japanese society. Then the text is discussed, taking into account the social, cultural, and ideological perspectives of Translation Studies.

**Table 2:** Occurrence of terms of address and reference in *Yakuza 0*

Term	Number of occurrences
San	354
Han	16
Sama	1
Chan	64
Kun	42

The term most commonly used is *san*, which is not surprising considering it is the most common form of homage in Japanese due to the social distance it shows (Wenger, 1982). *San* is the socially accepted way of designating someone with whom one is not intimate, hence its frequent use as a suffix to surnames. It is used by different characters in the story in various contexts. An example of the use of *san* in the English version of the game is in the table below. Screenshots for some of the scenes mentioned here are also provided, to give readers proper contextualization.

**Picture 2:** Use of *san* in the game’s dialogue



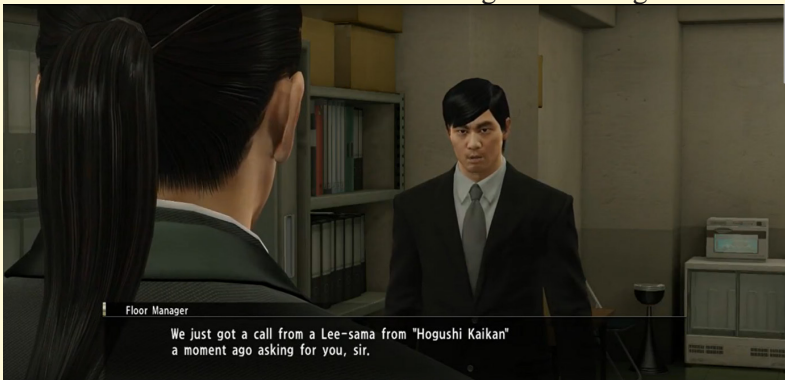
Source: *Yakuza 0* for PC (2018).

**Kiryu:** Fashion's not my thing. Besides, Kazama-san never wore flashy clothes.

At this point in the story, Kazuma Kiryu is still a low-level Yakuza about to leave the organization. He uses the term *san* to address Shintaro Kazama, the captain of the Dojima Family, a subsidiary family of the Yakuza group Tojo Clan that governs the Kanto region. Kiryu is a low-ranking officer in the Dojima Family, and Kazama is his superior in the organization and his mentor. The use of *san* to designate him indicates Kiryu's submissiveness and respect, which is conveyed to English-speaking players by leaving the term untranslated.

In contrast, *sama*, the more reverent term of address, has only one occurrence in the text:

**Picture 3:** Use of *sama* in the game's dialogue



**Source:** *Yakuza 0* for PC (2018).

**Floor Manager:** We just got a call from a Lee-sama from “Hogushi Kaikan” a moment ago asking for you, sir.

*Sama* is indeed used less often than *san* because it is an overly polite form of address usually reserved for specific situations. In



*Yakuza 0*, a minor character, only referred to as Floor Manager, uses it once. He is speaking to Goro Majima, the cabaret manager, and his boss (and also one of the protagonists in the game). The use of a super polite form of address may be due to the formal workplace situation and the lower rank of a floor manager. No other character ever uses *sama* in the story, which can be attributed to the game's setting — the criminal underworld — since it is not uncommon for characters to use impolite forms of address. An example of this in the text is the frequent use of *omae* お前, an informal word for “you” that can be considered rude or disrespectful when used outside of one's circle of relationships.

**Picture 4:** Use of *han* in the game's dialogue



**Source:** *Yakuza 0* for PC (2018).

<b>Majima:</b> Much obliged, Sagawa-han.
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The honorific *san* is often pronounced *han* by speakers of the Osaka dialect in the Kansai region. The meaning is the same. Only the pronunciation is different. *Han* is used in the game only by characters who speak the Osaka dialect, especially the main

character Majima. By maintaining the use of *han*, the translators were able to preserve not only the dynamics between the two characters but also a regional aspect, allowing players to distinguish speakers through the dialect.<sup>3</sup>

**Picture 5:** Use of *chan* in the game's dialogue



**Source:** *Yakuza 0* for PC (2018).

**Majima:** What's up, Yuki-chan? Ya nervous or somethin'?  
**Sagawa:** Catch ya on the flip side, Majima-chan.

Although the pronouns are not gender-specific, *chan* is more often used for babies, very young children, girls, and women with whom one is intimate (such as a relative, friend, or girlfriend). In

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<sup>3</sup> The translation of the Osaka dialect (and others from the Kansai region of Japan, such as the ones from the Kyoto, Nie, Wakayama, Nara, and Shiga Prefectures) into English has been the subject of discussion. To maintain consistent characterization and linguistic variation, translators have often opted to translate Kansai dialects as Southern or Texan accents, in American English, or a Cockney accent in British English (see Rasmussen, 2015).

Yakuza 0, *chan* is often used to address and refer to hostesses<sup>4</sup>. This is the case in the first line above, where Majima is addressing a hostess who works at the cabaret he runs (Yuki).

In this second line, however, it is used to address an adult male (Majima). The line is spoken by Tsukasa Sagawa, a senior member of the Omi Alliance, a Kansai Yakuza group. Although Majima has been expelled from the organization for insubordination, he is still associated with the Yakuza in a condition of servitude. Under Sagawa's tutelage, Majima is forced to work in the cabaret of the higher-ranking Yakuza. Addressing a subordinate in this way can be seen as *pawa hara* パワハラ (power harassment), a condescending attitude toward one's juniors. It can also just be a term of endearment. The presence of the address title *chan* may clue players into the complex relationship between Majima and Sagawa and allows English-speaking players to explore and interpret the dynamics in the relationship as Japanese-speaking players would.

#### Picture 6: Use of *kun* in the game's dialogue



Source: *Yakuza 0* for PC (2018).

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<sup>4</sup> As explained by Wicker (2012, p. 475), “[i]n Japanese hostess clubs, male customers drink alcohol, sing karaoke, and converse with young women who are paid to talk with and pamper them. These establishments are typically located in entertainment districts of the cities”.

**Yui the Hostess:** Don't keep us waiting, Nishikiyama-kun!

**Oda:** Not the sharpest knife, are you, Kiryu-kun? Say hello to our real negotiation partners.

The use of *kun* in subtitles is usually straightforward. In Japanese society, it is used for boys, or men who are inferior or equal to the speaker. In the first example above, *kun* is used by Yui, a hostess, to refer to her client Nishikiyama in a friendly manner. Since this is a transactional relationship, it can imply that it does not indicate intimacy, but works as a friendly facade put up by the hostess. In the second line, *kun* is used by Jun Oda, the employee of a dubious real estate company employing protagonist Kiryu after he leaves the Yakuza. *Kun* can be appropriate for a senior employee when addressing a junior.

### **Bringing Japanese media to Western audiences: implications**

Venuti (1995) considers the tendency to reduce the foreign elements in a target text as a reflection of power relations between cultures. He is critical of “ethnocentric reductions” that remove foreign cultural marks to create a domesticated text. In *Yakuza 0*, at least one aspect of the text avoids such reductions, contributing to the “movement” Schleiermacher spoke of: bringing the reader closer to the writer (and the source culture) by introducing them to the complex world of Japanese honorifics.

Not that there are not aspects of the translation that are more accessible to English speakers. The use of Japanese honorifics itself is done in Latin script, which avoids kana 仮名 and kanji 漢字 characters altogether. The translation chooses to domesticate certain linguistic-cultural features, such as the name order. According to Japanese tradition, the proper name order is family name first and given name second. The translation opts for the Western order,

which is the opposite. In this sense, Munday's remarks about the continuum existing between domestication and foreignization seem to be confirmed. There are no pure domestications, as there are no pure foreignizations.

However, the pervasive presence of honorifics, largely unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences, shows a clear attempt at moving the subtitle reader toward the language and hence the culture of the original. This is a foreignizing strategy not only for its use of words of Japanese origin (which, by itself, may not be considered foreignization, as they may be included in a text that conceals the flow and style of the source language in an attempt to produce a more fluent text) but for the unique meaning such structures carry that inform the reader's understanding of the dynamics between characters and social hierarchy in Japanese society. To understand them, the reader/player must have some familiarity with Japanese culture.

As the discussion around the terms of address and reference earlier in this section showed, understanding Japanese honorifics will give players extra insight into the dynamics of the characters, which would not have been possible if the localization team had opted for a more fluid, "invisible" translation. For instance, the term *san* could be translated as "Mr." or "Ms.," "sir" or "madam," but the subtle differences between *san*, *sama*, and *han* would disappear. It falls to the reader/player to seek the meaning embedded in the more foreign elements of the text.

In any case, this translation cannot be categorized as domestic or foreign in its entirety, but it is worth discussing what these strategies mean for source and target cultures and how they fit into the broad field of Japanese-to-English translation. In this regard, it is worth examining the following question that Hatim proposed regarding the problematic issue of foreignization: "Even when justified, doesn't foreignization immeasurably increase an already heavy burden on a target reader struggling to come to grips with an alien culture through translation?" (Hatim, 1999, p. 219)

This question is relevant in the case examined here because introducing several foreign words relevant to the story without a proper explanation of their meaning saddles English-speaking players with the burden of understanding concepts foreign to them. That such a large proportion of audiovisual translations from Japanese into English uses a potentially alienating technique may be related to the target audience's preferences for these productions. Sega considers the *Yakuza* series to be a niche, compared to other titles published by the company, with little mainstream appeal, because of its reliance on a deeper understanding of Japanese culture. However, by 2020, it had sold 14 million copies worldwide (Bolding, 2020). Perhaps a growing audience for Japanese media in the Anglo-American world is pleased with the cultural and linguistic features of the Japanese language and society, which leave an impression in the translated version. It would indicate an audience interested in consuming foreign works precisely because of their foreign nature, not in spite of it.

The Anglo-American tradition of preferring “the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities” which would make a translation transparent (Venuti, 1995, p. 1) in the publication of foreign literature does not seem to apply here if we are to consider the commercial and critical<sup>5</sup> success of *Yakuza 0* and other works that rely on some understanding of how the Japanese language, culture, and society are structured. There has been no attempt at creating a transparent translation that would conceal its foreign roots.

Looking at the big picture, this success seems to apply elsewhere. For example, anime currently dominates the animated television market, and Japan remains one of the world's leading centers for video game development. One need not look too deeply into the world of Japanese audiovisual media to find examples of translations that do not shy away from incorporating more obscure knowledge of Japanese language and culture. This is especially true of works that

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<sup>5</sup> Currently, it has the highest rating game in the *Yakuza* franchise, according to the review compilation website Metacritic (Pelliccio, 2021).

rely on Japanese culture-specific knowledge, such as the *Persona* and *Yakuza* video game series — works that, despite this barrier, have enjoyed tremendous critical and financial success in the West.

It may be that consumers of Japanese media prefer to be transported into the author's world, immersed in the culture, society, and to a small extent, even the language. If this is the case, Schleiermacher's proposed method of leading readers to the author may serve these audiences well. Moreover, it would certainly point to the existence of an English-speaking audience that challenges the traditional preconceptions of what makes a sound, fluent translation.

### **Final remarks**

This article examined the localized version of the video game *Yakuza 0* regarding the localization team's decision to leave untranslated the honorifics *san* さん, *han* はん, *sama* 様, *chan* ちゃん, and *kun* 君, associated with proper names of characters in the English version of the game. Such a choice is not uncommon in the translation of Japanese audiovisual media and occurs in several other cartoons and video games.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the function and meaning conveyed to an English-speaking audience by retaining these terms was discussed in light of the Japanese system of honorifics. Since English is a non-honorific language, some of the complex dynamics embedded in these terms of address and reference, which take into consideration age, gender, intimacy, and hierarchical position, might have been lost if the localization team had chosen a different approach.

We discussed the phenomenon of untranslated honorifics in audiovisual media from the perspective of Translation Studies, especially considering its cultural approach. Schleiermacher's idea of uniting the author (of the original work) and the reader (of the translated work) with two distinct strategies forms the starting point

for this discussion, addressing his influence on Venuti's conception of domestication and foreignization. Finally, some reasons for this approach are mentioned, as well as what it may mean with respect to possible cultural shifts regarding the consumption of foreign work in the Anglo-American world (at least when it comes to Japanese media). Of course, more research is needed to expand the body of media that falls under this umbrella. As noted earlier, there are more contemporary media using this translation style.

Other aspects of translating Japanese into English, such as techniques for translating non-standard language variations (such as Kansai dialects) or the study of the second group of honorifics proposed by Wenger (1982), can be considered from a sociolinguistic or cultural perspective, including terms such as *sensei* 先生 and *senpai* 先輩, which have been incorporated into the vernacular of English-speaking fans of Japanese media through their appearance in English translations.

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