**Globally Speaking Radio**

**Episode 053**

**How Netflix Localizes (Brilliantly!) for Kids in Japan**

R I'm Renato Beninatto.

M Renato, today on Globally Speaking, we have a guest who is talking to us about reaching other audiences outside the US.

R Yes, we're talking specifically about the Japanese market. We had a podcast recently about it, but Netflix, as you know, is one of the phenomena in the new economy.

M They're changing the whole game.

R They are changing the whole game about streaming content. And they have 117 million members, and this is...we're talking about April 2018. Maybe by the time you listen, they have over 120.

M Right, and those are only the people who have actually paid for the account.

R Yeah.

M That doesn't count sharing passwords or things like that.

R Or family.

M Or family. Yeah, yeah. They do have—

R I have many people on my account.

M Yep. Yep.

R They are present in 190 countries, but they’re only localizing their user interface into 26 languages. They've become a production powerhouse with over 400 originals that are translated into multiple languages. As we said on the previous podcast that we had on the Netflix effect, it is having a huge impact on the supply and demand for translation talent.

M Yeah. For translators, they've definitely made a big difference there, and today we're talking about something that many people may not have thought about, and that is their impact on UI and user experience.

R When it comes to children, it's a particularly difficult situation because of different levels of reading skills.

M Yeah. Once again, we find ourselves talking about alphabets. We talked with Tim with the Endangered Alphabets Project in Episode 34, and that was one of our better listened to and responded to podcasts. And now, here we are again looking at how Netflix is transforming the way that alphabets are used.

R It was one of my favorite, when the guy came in and said, "Oh, you're talking about Glagolitic."

M That's right. That's right.

R This time we're traveling to Japan, and here’s the thing—we all know that Japanese has three different alphabets. We're going to hear how Japanese children learn how to read, and how this affects the user interface, UI, for Netflix.

M Let's let our guest introduce herself.

Y My name is Yuka Ogasawara; I'm a Language Manager for Japanese at Netflix, and I'm based in the Tokyo office.

R I understand you work on a specific project at Netflix. What is that project?

Y So, our Globalization team is responsible for all the language quality on service, but for me, because I work very closely with the marketing team here in Tokyo, my main focus is the marketing side, and also there are many researches going on in Tokyo, so I participate in those as well.

R So, one of the projects that you are leading is Netflix for kids in Japan; tell us a little bit more about that project.

Y Sure, last year our research team decided to do some research for kids’ usability for categories on kids’ UI, and I attended that culled research, and we started working on the improvement of the usability of categories on their UI.

M Yuka, a couple things that our audience might not be totally familiar with, can you talk a bit about your Usability Team? And how they connect and what they do?

Y So, we have a Consumer Insight Team who covers everything, and also we have a separate UI as a general UI, which is for adults and also for kids’ UI, and there is another dedicated team for the kids’ UI. So those teams talk together to work on improvements for the kids’ UI.

R What were the key findings of this research that you did about categorization for kids in the general catalog? And how is that different for adults?

Y So, I attended that research, and I found that, first of all, there are many words that kids didn't understand in the categories, such as “comedy” or “documentaries.” Another problem was there are many kanji that younger kids couldn't read.

M I remember at one point you mentioned that some children or most children don't understand what the word “documentary” means until they're, like,12 or 13.

Y Yes.

M That's just one example of one of the insights that came out of this.

Y Yeah, and that was very surprising for me. Personally, I don't have kids, so I didn't know the level of understanding, and the gap was bigger when I met them.

R So, you did this with focus groups, I imagine? You brought people into the room, or did you just look at the behavior online?

Y We invited pairs of kids ages 5 to 13. Pairs of boys and girls, and we invited them to the room, and we observed their behaviors, and we asked questions.

R Yeah, because until a certain age, the choice is made by the parents. The kids don't go and choose what they're going to watch by themselves, so this issue is not a problem for the very young.

Y Yeah, so that was one of the questions as well. We asked them, “Do you use Netflix by yourself? Or do your parents choose content for you?”

R And for us non-Japanese speakers, we are in the language business, and we know that Japanese has basically, I thought three different alphabets, right? Katakana, hiragana, and kanji. Tell us a little bit about these three types of alphabet, and how and when they're used.

M This is the second podcast that we've talked about alphabets in particular. It's a really challenging thing to talk about a visual concept on a podcast; I just want to highlight that so—

R It was a fascinating podcast that we had in the summer of 2017 with Tim Brookes about endangered alphabets, but Japanese is far from an endangered alphabet. It’s actually very alive and kicking. So, there are these three different ... How do Japanese children learn these alphabets?

Y Sure, so kids start studying hiragana and katakana before they start going to school at the age of six. And hiragana and katakana both are phonetic alphabets; the only difference is katakana is used for loan words, like foreign words. And those hiragana and katakana are 96 alphabets in total, and usually kids can read and write before they start going to school.

R So 96 characters?

Y Yes.

R The two alphabets. Okay, and this is something that you learn in pre-school or at home before you—

Y Yes.

R Okay. And then once they go to school they start studying the third one, right?

Y From six years old, when kids start going to school, they start studying kanji. This is also known as Chinese characters, and kanji is used for content words including nouns and the stems of verbs and adverbs, and we write in a mixture of kanji, hiragana, and katakana for better legibility.

R So, you know, basically based on the curriculum, how many characters a child knows by the age of 7, by the age of 9, by the age of 12, and so on, theoretically.

Y Yes.

R Unless you have a prodigy and a genius who knows it.

M Right, exactly.

R Like Michael's children.

Y So every year at school, kids study different sets of kanji. In the first year when they're 6, they remember 80 kanji. And by 12 years old, they remember over a thousand kanji in total.

M Wow.

R And how many kanji characters are there?

Y So many, but the kanji that we usually use is around two thousand.

R Two thousand. Okay. So, this poses an interesting challenge because you cannot have a user interface for 6 to 7, 9 to12, or different ranges like that.

M You can only segment it so much.

Y Right.

R So how did you solve this problem at Netflix?

Y Sure, so Netflix kids’ UI is targeting toddlers to around 10 or 12 years old. So, we decided to add furigana to those difficult kanji.

R So you talked about hiragana, katakana, kanji, and now you're talking about furigana, what is that?

Y Furigana is a phonetic hiragana that we add usually on top of kanji.

R So, you put an explanation on top of a character, but is furigana the name of that feature, or is it the name of another alphabet?

Y Furigana is technically hiragana. So, it’s not a type of alphabet; they use hiragana as the alphabet. Furigana is a writing system that supports and explains how to read each kanji.

R Okay. I think I've seen this before. You have a kanji character and on top of it you have two smaller characters explaining what that kanji is, so that younger children can read that, is that correct?

Y Yes. That's called furigana, and that writing system to add the small letter on top of kanji is called “ruby”.

R How is it called again?

Y Ruby. R-U-B-Y.

R Ruby. Okay. So, this is how you solved the problem of categorization at Netflix by adding—it's not subtitles—overtitles on top of the characters, and that is what you call ruby, the actual character with the description of it on top.

Y Yes. So, unfortunately the ruby system is not supported on our UI. It's supported on subtitles, and that's what we are using right now. But it's not supported in many web services, including Netflix web UI or Netflix UI.

M And Renato, when I saw this for the first time, I was thinking it sort of cheats. It reminds me of when I studied Ancient Hebrew, where they give you the vowel symbols around the letters, whereas modern Hebrew doesn't have that, and this is just a little more sophisticated, providing greater context to the kanji words.

R Because Ancient Hebrew doesn't have vowels, right? So you would put the little dots to identify the vowel sounds.

M Mm-hmm (affirmative). This is like one step further.

R That's fascinating. So, let me see if I understand correctly. You have categories in your menu that are in kanji, but some of the kanji cannot be read by all the children.

So, if it were in a video, in subtitling, you would put a little note on top of the character in hiragana, and you call this furigana, so that the children would understand what that character that they don't know yet means. But the user interface doesn't allow that, so how did you solve that challenge?

Y So we decided to add furigana in brackets after kanji.

R Oh. Okay. So, it's like in a contract; in Latin characters you would write the number 12, and in parentheses you would write T-W-E-L-V-E, twelve in full.

Y Yes, yes.

M Were users quick to adapt and adjust to this being written differently, rather than in the ruby style? Or was there a transition period for them?

Y I don't think there was any difficulty for them to get used to the new writing system.

R So you had a ton of categories, right? I think that it's close to 200 categories. And then, how many of them did you have to change? All of them?

Y No, 160 of them. That’s still quite a lot.

R So give us some examples of the changes that you have made.

Y Sure. We also changed difficult words into easier words. So, the example would be in English “mystical creatures.” In Japanese it was [Japanese translation], which is a straight translation. But kids didn't understand what “mystical” means, so we changed it to “a story about witches, monsters, and ghosts.” We broke it down.

R Wow. That's fascinating. And what else, do you have another one?

Y Another example to break down was LOL. We were translating it as [Japanese translation]. Again, pretty straightforward translation, but we changed it to “let's laugh a lot.”

M And if you think about it, a lot of people are always trying to get to a more brief term or a more brief explanation, when sometimes when you make something brief, it makes it more complex, and people don't understand. So, these explanations that are a bit longer tend to be more clear to help people. And you all found results from this, correct? Users clicked on the new categories more often?

Y Yes. So, we found that the take rate for some categories increased more than 20 percent.

M And this was the only factor that changed?

Y For the data, yes.

M Yeah. That's great.

R Yeah, well, a 20 percent increase, I would take that in anything. That's good.

Y We decided to add furigana, instead of changing all the kanji to hiragana, to accommodate the wide range of kids. And the interesting story was, I asked older kids, I think they were 12 years old, “What do you think if the category “animal,” [Japanese translation], is written all in hiragana?”

Y And they said, “I would feel that that content is for little kids,” not for them. So that category wouldn't seem interesting to them anymore.

R So what did you do? Did you have an “animal for kids” and an “animal for teenagers,” or something like that? I'm assuming here if you see “animals” in hiragana, there would be unicorns and cartoons and wonder pads and things like that.

Y Baby animals in diapers, yeah.

R And if you wrote it in kanji, it would be about horses, dogs, and real animals.

Y In Kanji, and something that could maybe make you cry, the friendship between animals. So it's more for older kids.

R So how was the solution, did you keep both?

Y The solution was to add furigana after the [Japanese translation] in kanji.

R Oh. Okay. So that includes both.

Y Yes. Exactly.

R And are there any categories that are intrinsically Japanese? Any categories that I wouldn't find in the US or European Netflix versions?

Y Yeah, categories depend on the market, so I'm sure there is. I'm not sure about the kids' UI right now, but for example, Japanese people love anime, and we have a very particular anime category that doesn't exist in the US.

R What is that?

Y It's called “slice of life” and it's an anime where nothing happens. It's like school life, a little bit of romance, but not too much drama.

M It's just people talking. Our podcast might fall into that category, Renato. Just a slice of life.

R It makes me think of Norwegian slow TV, which I think is on Netflix also. You can see this movement that started in Norway. I think that the first show is a train ride that takes 15 hours from the south of Norway all the way to the—

M Sounds riveting.

R They have a knitting competition also. That's kind of a boring slice of life. I apologize to our listeners in Norway.

M Yes. Big fan of the slow TV.

R That's funny. So, these are cartoons, these are anime about kids in school, essentially?

Y Yes. And that's extremely popular in Japan.

R Well, when you say it's extremely popular, do you, Yuka, watch it?

Y I'm not a big anime fan to be honest. I don't.

R Okay.

M This is so interesting that Netflix redefined how translators subtitle videos, right? With that technology that they released and now have pulled back. Now, in this conversation, we're hearing how they are redefining user experience and how that has a major language component to it. They're really one of the more innovative and thoughtful companies when it comes to language and international that's out there right now.

Yuka, do you see these types of experiments and research informing how Netflix approaches their UI moving forward?

Y It's happening all the time. So, the Consumer Insight Team is conducting a lot of research and also surveys, and we do a lot of A/B testing and data analysis. So, it's an ongoing process.

M That's great. So, it will be changing before our eyes.

Y Yes.

M And before we close, she has to share her favorite Netflix original or what she's watching now.

R Yes. Any recommendations for our listeners? What should we watch?

Y My most favorite original is called *Love*, but actually the final season just came out. So, the good thing is you can binge watch all of them right now.

**End of Conversation**