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# Localization for South Korea

## Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivities Ease Sales

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*Multilingual Computing & Technology*

**S**outh Korea is a leading market of Asia and a leader in popular culture of the region. It is also, according to Don Shin, founder of 1-Stop Translation in Los Angeles, California, a good place to start if you hope to do business in Asia. "In the past," says Shin, "the culture came from Japan, but now it's shifted to South Korea. What's popular in South Korea is accepted as the best in other countries, especially China, Taiwan, and other southern East Asian countries. So, it's better to start with South Korea if you have other Asian markets in mind."

Is your product ready for South Korea? Are you ready to do business there? Have you looked into localization for South Korea?

### WHAT IS LOCALIZATION?

Localization is the process that adapts a product to a language, culture, or market other than where it was originally built. A successfully localized product will look, feel, and operate as if it had been designed in, and made in and for, that country. The term is used particularly in the software industry, where localization often results in changes to the product's user interface—that is, the language and writing system used for such information as the proper display of time, date, numbers, and currency formats. The process includes translation, but it is much more than that.

Why localize your product? Localization makes your product more accessible to end users and customers. And it makes good financial sense. The research firm Common Sense Advisory recently surveyed managers of 50 global businesses and learned that they spent "between one quarter of one percent and 2.5 percent of their non-U.S.,

non-Anglophone-market revenue per year to localize product documentation, user interfaces, Web sites and service-related materials for six to ten markets." That small investment in localization for those six to ten new markets opens the door to increased sales around the world.

Localization of a product requires understanding how the target language and culture work—that is, how people will perceive the product, what laws or regulations affect it, and how it fits into the local environment.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOUTH KOREAN MARKET

Each industry and each business localizing for South Korea will have special requirements or considerations. "For example," Shin says, "for drug sellers, their drug-importing-related regulation is most important, while for software companies the double-byte conversion costs a lot of time and effort. For Web-based businesses, their first concern should be the different sequence in sentences and the variety of honorifics and articles (in grammar) that makes Web site localization very troublesome."

A few points can be made in general terms. "You should know," Shin says, "that South Korea has a very well-developed Internet and communications. More than 99 percent are using broadband Internet connections, and their DSL is five times faster than DSL in the United States. From seven-year-olds to 70-year-olds, 90 percent of them are very good with computers and the Internet. In localization you should have this different environment in mind. For example, South Korean Web sites and software are more active and colorful because they do not worry about speed and memory that much."

Shin also points out that South Korea is a small country geographically—a five-hour drive from end to end. This means that with fast Internet connections and communication available, trends change quickly. Traditional market research may be too slow to keep up with them. He comments that while testing consumer acceptance is useful, this can be a dangerous market in which to make long-term commitments.

To do business in South Korea, some business experts strongly recommend finding a local partner (or at least a contact person) to make formal introductions and a government-approved agent to advise you. "It depends on the partner and business sector you work in," Shin says. "For example, to do a food chain, you can do that yourself, but to sell network marketing, you definitely need a partner."

What industries are most likely to find a market in South Korea? "Education and fashion!" Shin says, "especially

English education—that is a big, big market. For example, an Ivy Leaguer can charge \$3,000 per month for three hours per week for English tutoring, and usually students take three to five lessons.”

## ALPHABET, LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES ARE KEY

The Korean language is mostly written in the Hangul alphabet in which 14 base consonants and 10 base vowels are combined to form syllables in complex ways. Written materials may also include characters in Hanja, which is the Korean name for the Chinese ideographic system, with its thousands of characters. Like Chinese and Japanese, Korean is a double-byte language, which means that Korean text often requires more memory or more space for input or for field names than comparable English or French text.

Since each Korean character consists of two to five alphabetic characters combined together, it's hard to read in small print. Korean characters therefore need to be bigger than Latin-script characters. This makes a difference on any printed material and on the user interface of a software screen.

The sequence of words in a Korean sentence is different from English, as are the ways to show dates, time, and measurements.

“It's a very different language,” Shin emphasizes, “So you should understand that if you've gone into other European languages, please prepare for going into Korean to take twice as much time and expense.” The one piece of good news, according to Shin, is that the language specialists in South Korea have enough experience and skill to do the job.

## FINDING VENDORS TO DO THE WORK

When you are ready to build your product or Web site for South Korea, you need to consider a number of questions. What in your product, Web site, software, and/or documentation needs cultural adaptation or translation for Korea? Do you want to work with a provider who is close to your

market or close to your company headquarters in the United States? Do you want to launch a Korean product at the same time as the English version, or later?

It is wise to find translation and localization professionals who have extensive experience in Korean-language work and up-to-date knowledge of South Korean regulations and business practices. Just as you would prefer a manager who has extensive experience with accounting software, if that is your product, you will want to work with translators, interpreters, and localizers who are comfortable with accounting and software terminology in both languages.

Many localization or translation companies combine specializations along with project management services. They may focus on one language combination or an industry such as automotive manuals, medical-device software, or legal documents. Each one is different.

For example, Shin's company ([www.1stoptpr.com](http://www.1stoptpr.com)) specializes in Asian languages, especially Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Services include translation and interpreting, typesetting, printing, software localization, voice recording, and subtitling. The company has branch offices in China and South Korea.

Another company, Beijing E-C Translation Ltd. in Beijing ([www.e-china.com](http://www.e-china.com)), “focuses on the translation of English/German/Japanese into and from Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Thai. The company has a branch in South Korea and works in software and Web site localization, technical translation, and desktop publishing.

Boffin Technologies Ltd. ([www.boffinchina.com](http://www.boffinchina.com)) in Shenzhen, China, offers software localization and testing, Web site localization and engineering, and desktop publishing in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and major European languages. TargeTek Co. Ltd. ([www.targetek.com.tw](http://www.targetek.com.tw)) in Taipei, Taiwan, describes its services as software application localization, documentation translation and desktop publishing, Web site localization, and multimedia localiza-

## Learning More About Localization

For more information about localization, take a look at some of these resources:

- John Amos, *Cultural Navigation Guide to Europe, Asia and Latin America* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Interlingua Publications Ltd., 2001).
- Declan's Korean Language Page ([www.declan-software.com/korean.htm](http://www.declan-software.com/korean.htm)). This Web site has information about the Korean language and script, plus links to Korean language learning sites and other language and cultural resources.
- Donald A. DePalma, “Establishing Key Performance Indicators for Localization,” in *MultiLingual Computing & Technology* (Supplement no. 57, July/August 2003; available at [www.multilingual.com](http://www.multilingual.com)).
- Lingo Systems, *The Guide to Translation and Localization: Preparing Products for the Global Marketplace* (Available at [www.lingosys.com](http://www.lingosys.com)).
- Bill Tuthill and David Smallberg, *Creating Worldwide Software*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Sun Microsystems Press, 1997).

tion for the Traditional and Simplified Chinese, Japanese, and Korean markets.

## INFORMING YOURSELF BEFOREHAND

To help client companies understand the process and ask the right questions, Lingo Systems, a localization and translation company in Portland, Oregon, has published *The Guide to Translation and Localization*. You can request a free copy at [www.lingosys.com](http://www.lingosys.com).

MultiLingual Computing ([www.multilingual.com](http://www.multilingual.com)), publisher of the magazine *MultiLingual Computing & Technology*, maintains an on-line list of resources for localization, internationalization, translation, and other language-related industries. More than 1,300 links are available, and access is free of charge. ■

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