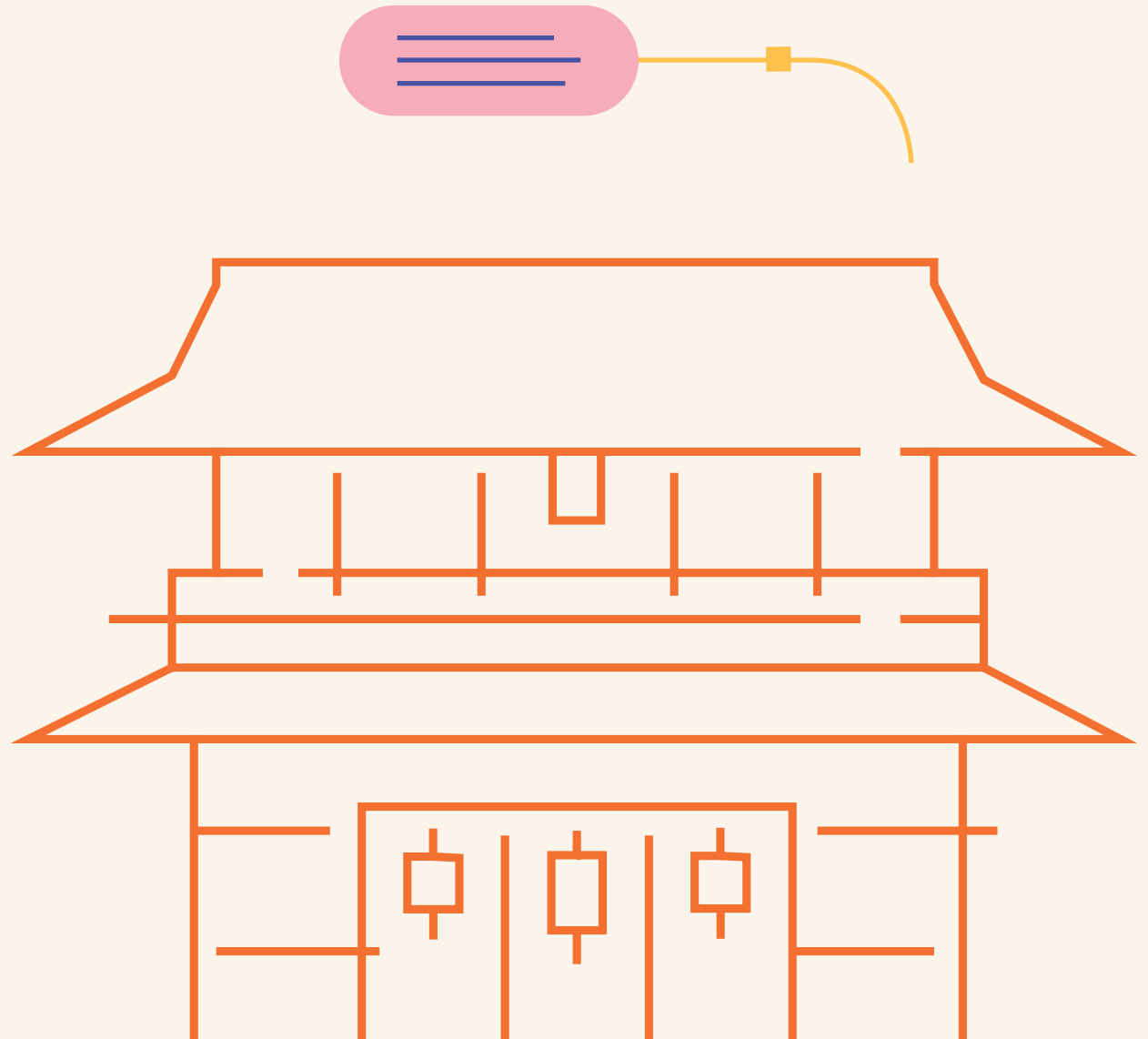
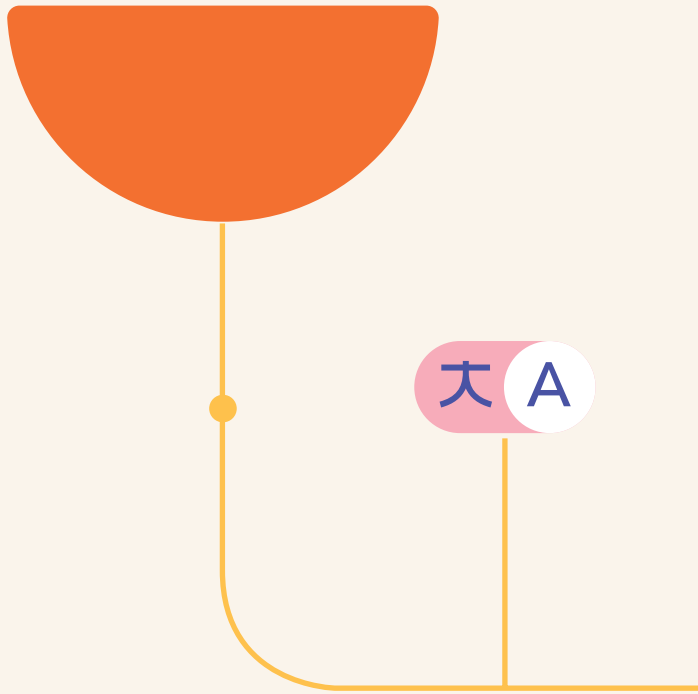


JAPANESE



How to Approach Customer Support

Tips for achieving better translations and respecting cultural norms

Introduction

Global businesses today serve a diverse set of customers who speak different languages, come from different countries and regions, and have different cultural contexts.

Every one of the more than 6,900 distinct languages spoken around the world is unique, and cultural nuances can vary widely. It's important to understand these factors when providing customer service. Communicating in the customer's native language and behaving in culturally appropriate ways help develop and nurture trust. This is why any customer-centric business should strive to build cross-cultural competency into their customer service organization.

To help you achieve this, Unbabel has put together a series of language guides. Our goal is to provide helpful and illuminating context in an easy-to-digest format. In this guide, we'll cover the Japanese language.



About the Japanese Language

Approximately 121 million people speak Japanese as their native language, primarily concentrated in the Japanese archipelago, where it is the native language of Japan. It is also spoken in Japanese communities in North and South America, Europe, and Australia. The language is divided into three major dialects: Eastern, which is spoken in Eastern and Northern Honshu and

Hokkaido; Western, spoken in Western Honshu and Shikoku; and Southern, spoken in Kyushu. Most speakers are able to communicate in standard Japanese, regardless of dialect. In this guide, we will focus specifically on Japanese speakers from Japan, but many of the nuances apply to Japanese speakers who reside in other countries as well.

HAJIME-
MASHITE

KONNICHIWA



Core concepts in Japanese culture relevant to customer service

HIGH CONTEXT

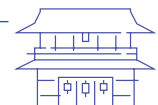
Japanese culture is considered “high context”: The Japanese pay a lot of attention to subtle and unspoken communication, largely due to the homogenous population that has been raised with the same rules and norms. A lot of Japanese communication happens through gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice.

RESPECT AND HUMILITY

The Japanese culture is steeped in respect and humility. They believe in treating the person who supports their livelihoods with polite kindness, and one bad customer service experience can result in them terminating the relationship with a company. It is a very polite society.

VERBAL

Finally, Japanese speakers tend to prefer verbal agreements over written ones. While they make decisions quickly, they often do not want to be pressured into signing anything.



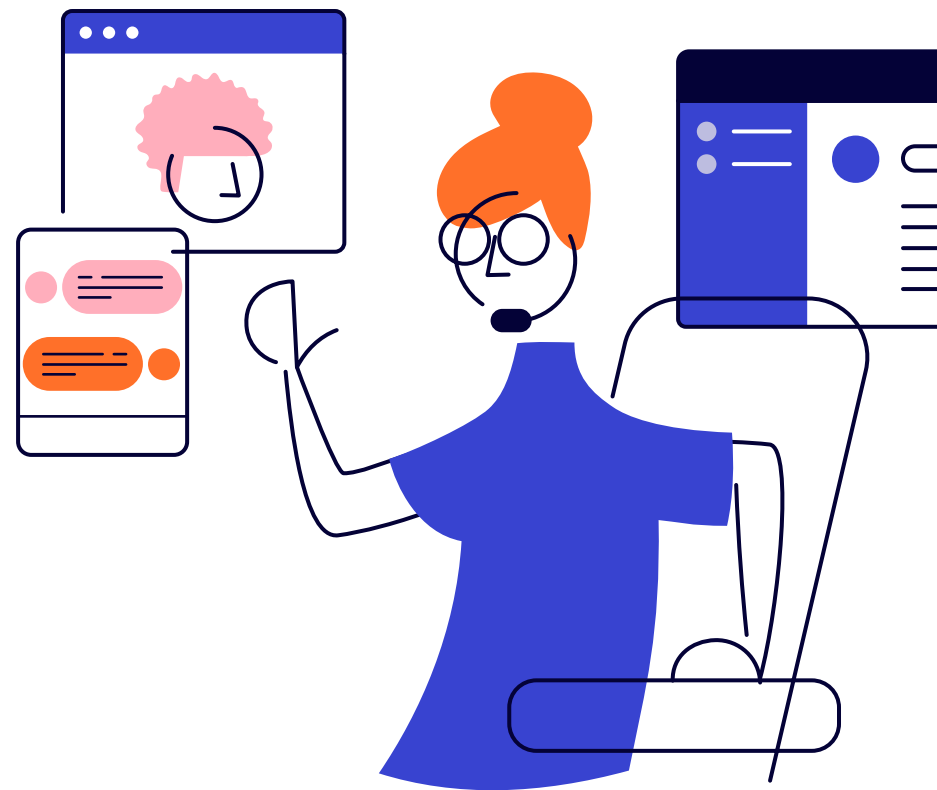
Best practices for communicating with Japanese customers

USE FORMAL GREETINGS

Formality is very important in Japan, and the Japanese normally use formal greetings and closings. This is especially important in a business setting. When addressing each other, the Japanese use the person's last name followed by a suffix, typically "sama" (more formal) and "san" (slightly less formal, but still respectful). Therefore, someone with the last name Tanaka would be addressed as "Tanaka sama" or "Tanaka san," depending on the level of formality and the expectations in that environment.

AVOID PERSONAL QUESTIONS

The Japanese associate good customer service with professionalism. While the Western impulse is to ask personal questions, in Japan, these are seen as intrusive. It's very uncommon to engage in small talk or try to establish a personal rapport in a business context.



Best practices for communicating with Japanese customers

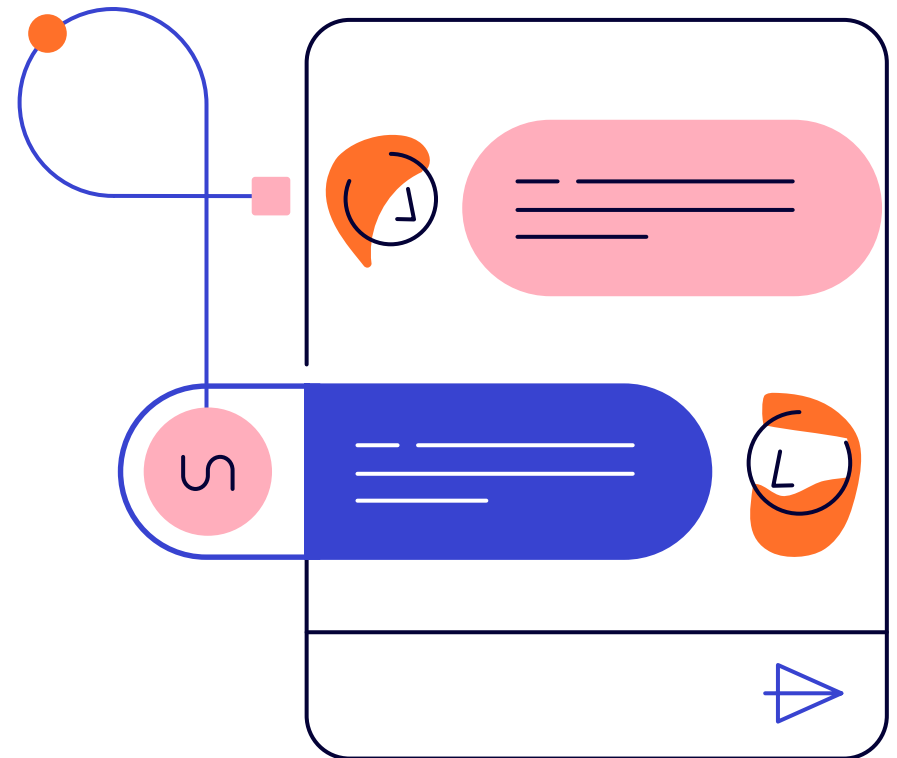
TRY TO ANTICIPATE NEEDS

In Japan, “omotenashi,” or “hospitality,” is a cultural cornerstone. This refers to a more proactive type of hospitality where service staff try to anticipate the customer’s needs and act accordingly. It dovetails with the high-context culture of the Japanese.

BE STRAIGHTFORWARD

Japanese speakers tend to be very literal; colloquialisms such as “You must be kidding!” need to be avoided. Similarly, when refusing something, “maybe” and “probably” are viewed as a “yes.” Additionally, if there is a problem, do not hesitate to apologize. However, in some cases, “mildly” positive phrases, such as “We will give it consideration,” might be viewed as a refusal. It’s always better to double down on your positive statements by using a stronger word like “certainly” or “definitely” (sekkyokuteki ni).

In summary, to best communicate with the Japanese, use formal greetings, be professional, try to anticipate what they’ll need by reading between the lines, and use straightforward words and phrases.



Best practices for optimizing machine translation output

When writing in English with the knowledge that the content will be translated into Japanese, there are several best practices to follow.



- 1 Avoid long sentences (over 30 words)
- 2 Avoid idioms or slang
- 3 Keep it simple and straightforward
- 4 Copyedit to avoid typos
- 5 Use active voice to reduce ambiguity
- 6 Avoid abbreviations, including contractions like "you're" and "we'd"
- 7 Be consistent, especially with terms like "email" that can be written multiple ways

- 8 Stick to English grammar rules
 - Ensure no spaces are missing
 - Use proper punctuation and capitalization
 - Finish all sentences (do not use fragments)
 - Avoid double subjects (e.g., the noun and a pronoun referencing it)
 - Ensure the word order is correct
 - Check for subject-verb agreement (person and number in singular/plural) and pronoun agreement (person, gender, and number)
 - Format messages correctly (e.g., with no extra line breaks, bullets or asterisks)



Best practices specific to English-Japanese Machine Translation

1 USE FORMAL GREETINGS AND CLOSINGS

In Japanese, the formal tone is widely used in customer support. At the beginning of the email, avoid asking the client questions about how they are, how they are doing, how their day is going, etc.

Avoid addressing the client with “friend” or by their proper name. Address them always as “Dear customer.” If the agent introduces themselves with a foreign proper name, the Japanese customer will probably be more inclined to excuse improper translations and imperfect Japanese sentences.

GREETINGS

not advised

- How are you?
- How was your day today?
- Dear Peter,
- What do you say, my friend?
- How are you?
- How was your day today?
- Hello, how can I help you?
- Hi, thank you for contacting us.

advised

- Dear customer...
- Thanks for waiting, dear customer.
- Thank you for contacting us. This is [customer name] support.

At the end of the conversation, if you want to thank the customer for their patience and the time spent on solving the problem, expressions that are culturally appropriate should be used.

CLOSINGS

not advised

- I really appreciate your time and patience throughout the process.
- Goodbye!
- See you!
- Have a great day!
- It was nice working with you.

advised

- I really appreciate your time throughout the process.
- With kind regards,
- Yours sincerely,



Best practices specific to English-Japanese Machine Translation

2 CHOOSE TONE-RELATED EXPRESSIONS CAREFULLY

Avoid including sentences like the following, as they are not commonly used in Japanese customer support situations.

not advised

- Have a good time!
- It was nice working with you.
- Don't worry!
- I am happy that [...]
- By the way
- I hope that [...]
- Thank you for sharing your concern.

advised

- It was a pleasure to help you. Thank you for contacting us.

Avoid using 'all right' as a filler sentence, as it can be highly ambiguous in Japanese.

not advised

- All right!

advised

- Ok.
- Okay.

3 AVOID EMOJIS

not advised

- Good morning, Stefannie :)

advised

- Good morning, Stefannie.

4 AVOID INTERJECTIONS

Interjections are another marker for informal tone and should be avoided when writing to a Japanese audience.

not advised

- Oh, I'm so sorry about that.
- Ah, that's alright.

advised

- I'm sorry about that.
- That's alright.



Best practices specific to English-Japanese Machine Translation

5 BE STRAIGHTFORWARD BUT COURTEOUS

When you cannot meet the customer's expectation, be straightforward, yet not discourteous. Whenever possible, avoid using the negative form in sentences and use the positive form instead. It is recommended that you avoid using negative words such as "unable" and "sorry," and shift the focus on what can be done.

not advised

- I'm very sorry but we are unable to do anything to help you.

advised

- This is all we can do to help you at this point.

6 BE SPECIFIC

When possible, always specify what the sentence is about, avoiding vague words like "it", "this", "that", etc.

not advised

- We deeply apologize for any convenience caused by using us.

advised

- We apologize for any inconvenience caused by not receiving the complete order.



Best practices specific to English-Japanese Machine Translation

7 AVOID DECIMALS IN CURRENCY

Ensure that amounts do not contain decimals such as ‘.00’ in the end, as this is not suitable for the Japanese currency. The yen is the lowest value possible in this case.

not advised

· 12,744.00 JPY

advised

· 12,744 JPY

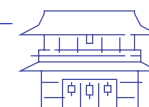
7 EXPRESSION LIST

not advised

- We understand that [...]
- We would like to inform you that [...]
- It appears that [...]
- Let me [...]
- To solve, [...]
- It is not our desire to [...]
- We hope [...]

advised

- We appreciate your understanding.
- We apologize for the inconvenience [...]



The Golden Rules of Customer Service



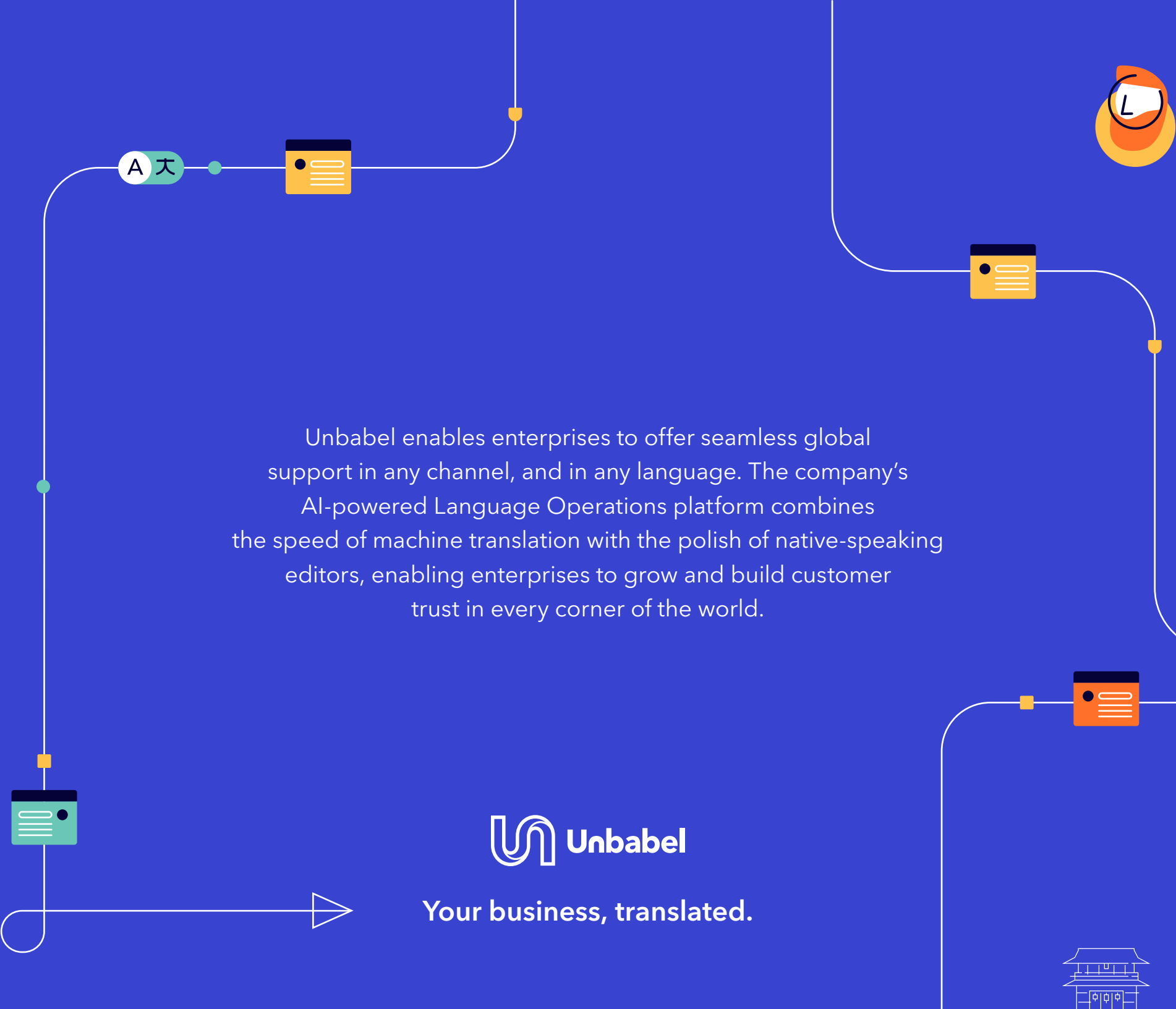
Of course, some best practices do not vary by language and should be applied to every customer service interaction. Here are the nine best practices we recommend.

- 1 EVERY INTERACTION MATTERS.** Always put in the best effort to make each interaction – every single one – a great one.
- 2 READ, DON'T SKIM.** Ensure you do not miss any valuable details or context in the message.
- 3 COMMUNICATE CONCISELY.** Only give the information you need to, helping your customer to find the answers to their questions or queries as fast and as efficiently as possible.
- 4 FOCUS ON GREAT SUPPORT BEFORE FAST SUPPORT.** Speed is important, of course, but it should not take precedence over quality.
- 5 MAKE THINGS EASY.** Always aim to reduce customer effort and take the burden off them when it comes to getting answers or help for their concern.

- 6 BE RESPECTFUL.** Always say “please” and “thank you.” This applies across cultural contexts and demographics. Politeness never goes out of style.
- 7 TAKE A NEUTRAL STANCE ON ISSUES.** There’s no reason to cause friction in a customer service interaction. Don’t take a stance on issues – even ones that seem harmless.
- 8 REMAIN POSITIVE.** This helps customers gain confidence in your ability to help them.
- 9 USE SIMPLE TERMS.** Keep it simple to avoid confusion and mistranslation when working across languages and cultural context, but don’t patronize customers.

In today’s competitive and globalized business climate, businesses who treat their customers with care and respect – including by speaking their language and respecting their cultural norms – will have the most success.





Unbabel enables enterprises to offer seamless global support in any channel, and in any language. The company's AI-powered Language Operations platform combines the speed of machine translation with the polish of native-speaking editors, enabling enterprises to grow and build customer trust in every corner of the world.



Your business, translated.

