

Untranslatable Japanese business terminology: A qualitative study on culture-bound loanwords retained in global English communication

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Article History

Submitted date:
2025-11-17
Accepted date:
2025-11-29
Published date:
2025-11-30

Keywords:

global English communication; Japanese business culture; loanwords; untranslatability

Abstract

Some culturally rooted Japanese business phrases do not have the precise equivalents in English business terminologies. It is prompting the translators, multinational corporations, and worldwide media to use the original Japanese lexical form. This study examines how Japanese business terms like *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai*, are used in English-language business discourse. The dataset comprises 37 documents collected between 2019 and 2024 from three source categories: (1) Japanese corporate publications, including sustainability reports and content from the official websites of hotel, automotive, and retail companies (12 documents); (2) international business media articles published by *Nikkei Asia*, *Forbes*, *BBC Worklife*, and *Harvard Business Review* (15 articles); and (3) Japanese tourism promotional materials, including publications from the Japan National Tourism Organization, digital brochures, and campaign materials from the Visit Japan initiative (10 documents). Grounded in Jakobson's (1995) in theory of cultural untranslatability and further informed by Appiah (1993) notion of thick translation and *Skopos Theory* (Vermeer, 1978) and by using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach supported by lexical content analysis, the study identified three main reasons for translation retention: (1) high cultural density and embedded socio-ethical values, (2) lack of conceptual equivalence in English, and (3) strategic branding that leverages Japanese for global market identity. The findings reveal that explanatory paraphrasing and loanword preservation regularly coexist, implying that English-language business communication employs hybrid semantic representation to accommodate Japanese concepts. The study comes to the conclusion that leadership practice, worldwide brand positioning, and intercultural business negotiations are all influenced by untranslatable business concepts.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:

bahasa Inggris global; budaya bisnis Jepang; kata serapan; komunikasi; untranslatability

Istilah bisnis Jepang yang sulit diterjemahkan: Studi kualitatif tentang kata serapan berbasis budaya yang dipertahankan dalam komunikasi bahasa Inggris global

Frasa bisnis Jepang yang berakar pada budaya tidak selalu memiliki padanan yang tepat dalam terminologi bahasa Inggris. Hal ini mendorong penerjemah, perusahaan multinasional, dan media dunia untuk menggunakan bentuk leksikal asli bahasa Jepang. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana istilah bisnis Jepang seperti *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, dan *senpai-kōhai* digunakan dalam wacana bisnis berbahasa Inggris. Dataset penelitian terdiri dari 37 dokumen yang dikumpulkan pada periode 2019–2024 dari: (1) publikasi korporat Jepang, meliputi laporan keberlanjutan dan konten pada situs resmi perusahaan hotel, otomotif, dan ritel (12 dokumen); (2) media bisnis internasional, artikel *Nikkei Asia*, *Forbes*, *BBC Worklife*,

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dan *Harvard Business Review* ; serta (3) materi promosi pariwisata Jepang, termasuk publikasi Japan National Tourism Organization, brosur digital, dan materi kampanye Visit Japan. Berdasarkan teori terjemahan Jakobson (1995), Appiah (1993), dan Vermeer (1978), serta menggunakan pendekatan analisis wacana kualitatif yang didukung oleh analisis isi leksikal, studi ini mengidentifikasi tiga alasan utama retensi terjemahan: (1) kepadatan budaya yang tinggi dan nilai sosio-etika yang tertanam, (2) kurangnya kesetaraan konseptual dalam bahasa Inggris, dan (3) pencitraan merek strategis yang memanfaatkan "bahasa Jepang" untuk identitas pasar global. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa parafrasa eksplanatif, dan pelestarian kata serapan sering terjadi bersamaan, menyiratkan bahwa komunikasi bisnis berbahasa Inggris menggunakan representasi semantik hibrida untuk mengakomodasi konsep-konsep bahasa Jepang. Studi ini sampai pada kesimpulan bahwa praktik kepemimpinan, pemosisian merek global, dan negosiasi bisnis antarbudaya semuanya dipengaruhi oleh konsep-konsep bisnis yang tidak dapat diterjemahkan.

1 Introduction

The globalization of business has driven the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction in cross-border corporate communications, including among Japanese companies operating in international markets. A notable phenomenon emerging from this global shift is the retention of certain Japanese business-related terms in their original form rather than translating them into English. Terms such as *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* frequently appear on company websites, international business media articles, sustainability reports, and Japanese tourism promotional materials. These three terms represent communicative concepts with deep cultural meanings and social relationships that are difficult to convey directly with English lexical equivalents. The continued circulation of culturally embedded Japanese business terms within English discourse suggests not only a linguistic practice but also a strategic construction of cultural identity in global markets. Such retention affects how international readers understand Japanese business values and how corporations, media, and tourism institutions position “Japaneseness” in the global sphere.

Existing linguistics and translation studies have shown that several Japanese cultural terms are culturally bound and possess a high level of semantic density (Murawaki, 2019; Takahashi, 2025). *Omotenashi*, for example, refers to an ethic of sincere service that focuses not solely on commercial service functions but also on the moral value of deep attention to guest needs. The term *ikigai* carries an existential meaning related to the purpose of life and the meaning of work in spiritual and psychological dimensions, promoting well-being. Meanwhile, the *senpai-kōhai* system cannot be reduced to a mere “senior-junior” relationship within the organization, but rather a relationship that binds both parties in a social-hierarchical network that protects, guides, and respects each other.

Understanding how Japanese business terms are strategically retained in English discourse is urgently needed in the current global business landscape. Between 2019 and 2024, the use of culturally loaded Japanese keywords has increased across international corporate communication, employer branding, and tourism promotion; however, there is limited analytical clarity about how these terms shape perceptions of Japanese values and organizational culture. Without systematic analysis, global audiences may interpret these terms only at the surface level, missing the institutional intentions embedded within them, whether to build corporate identity, market cultural authenticity, or construct national soft power. Therefore, examining the discursive functions

of *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* is essential not only for translation studies but also for international business communication, branding strategy, and cross-cultural management.

Although several studies have discussed Japanese cultural terms in a translation context, these studies have mainly focused on the semantic characteristics and cultural depth of individual terms (e.g., Murawaki, 2019; Takahashi, 2025), or on the theoretical explanation of untranslatability and thick translation using the frameworks of Jakobson in Jakobson (2021) and Appiah (1993). These studies examine what the terms mean and why they are difficult to translate, but they do not analyse how the terms are actually used in English-language business discourse. They also do not investigate how institutions construct and frame meanings for global audiences, nor how the retention of Japanese terms functions as part of a communication strategy or nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Kotler & Gertner, 2007).

Therefore, the specific gap this study addresses is the lack of discourse-analytic research that examines both the representation and the institutional purposes behind the retention of *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* within English corporate and promotional texts. Therefore, this research is important for explaining how Japanese culture in meaning articulated in global business discourse through language strategies that maintain term the original. Addressing this issue expands understanding not only of translation strategies but also of cultural representation, global corporate communication, and the discourse of international branding.

In line with that, this research focuses on three terms that have high frequency of representation in Japanese business, namely *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai*. These three were chosen because each illustrates important aspects of Japanese work ethics and business communication: service based on social values, life purpose in work, and hierarchical relations in organizations. By focusing on real business discourse rather than idealized definition, this study contributes to translation studies, discourse analysis, and corporate communication by revealing how cultural meaning is constructed, framed, and circulated globally.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are the terms *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* represented in English-language business discourse?
2. Why are these terms retained in their Japanese form (untranslated loanwords) even though they appear in English texts?
3. What discourse strategies do authors or institutions use to explain the meaning of these terms to global audiences?

This research also aims to:

1. Describe the retention and representation of Japanese terms in English documents.
2. Identify factors of untranslatability from a cultural perspective and the purposes of business communication.
3. Explain the discourse strategies used to construct Japanese cultural meanings and values.

Ultimately, this research is expected to contribute to translators, corporate communication practitioners, and international promotional material compilers in terms of translation and discourse analysis in the context of Japanese business terms in the international world and in relation to the preservation of the concept of Japanese work culture in global communication.

2 Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate how the terms *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* are represented and interpreted in English-language business publications. A discourse-analytic approach was selected because the aim of the research extends beyond identifying lexical occurrences of Japanese terms; it seeks to uncover how cultural meanings and ideological values are constructed and projected to global audiences. While content analysis would enable only quantification or categorization of lexical forms, CDA allows examination of the sociocultural power relations embedded in language choice and meaning framing, making it methodologically appropriate for business discourse that functions as both communication and persuasion.

The decision to adopt a qualitative (rather than mixed-method) approach is based on the research focus on *interpretive cultural meaning-making* rather than measuring frequency or perception. The discourse analysis in this study refers to the views of Fairclough (1995), Van Leeuwen (2008), and Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000) who view language as a social practice that constructs knowledge, identity, and power relations.

2.1 Data and sampling

The data consist of English texts containing at least one of the three research terms, generated between 2019 and 2024 through documentation methods. Purposive sampling was applied using the following criteria:

Table 1: Sampling method

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
English-language texts	Materials translated automatically without editor attribution
Contains <i>omotenashi</i> , <i>ikigai</i> , and/or <i>senpai-kōhai</i>	Texts mentioning the terms only as vocabulary lists without contextual explanation
Context related to business, work, service, organization, branding, or cultural imagery	Personal blogs or non-institutional user-generated content
Published by corporate, media, or governmental/promotional institutions	Academic journal articles (to avoid theoretical circularity)

A total of 37 documents met the criteria. Sampling saturation was achieved when the last five documents no longer produced new discourse-strategy patterns.

Table 2. Research data sources

Source Category	Platform/ Document	Number of Data
(1) Japanese corporate publications	sustainability reports, official websites of hotel, automotive, and retail companies	12 documents
(2) International business media	Nikkei Asia, Forbes, BBC Worklife, Harvard Business Review	15 articles
(3) Japanese tourism promotional materials	Japan National Tourism Organization, digital brochure, Visit Japan campaign	10 documents

The research data consists of English texts containing the terms *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai*, obtained through documentation methods. The data corpus was collected from three types of sources as stated in Table 1.

This study employs a descriptive-interpretive qualitative design, with the aim of describing linguistic phenomena and explaining the cultural meanings that emerge in the context of the use of Japanese terms in English-language business discourse. This approach allows the researcher to investigate untranslatability as a linguistic and ideological phenomenon, in line with the theoretical frameworks of (Appiah, 1993; Jakobson, 2021; Vermeer & Chesterman, 2021).

A total of 37 documents published between 2019 and 2024 were collected. They were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of English-language texts containing at least one of the three research terms, and the context of use related to business, work, organizations, services, or Japanese cultural imagery.

2.2 Analytical procedures

2.2.1 Identification and segmentation of text units

All documents in the corpus were examined to locate occurrences of the three Japanese terms under study. Each time *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, or *senpai-kōhai* appeared, the surrounding textual segment was extracted as a data unit. Segmentation was conducted at the sentence and paragraph level rather than at the individual word level to ensure that meaning construction could be captured in context. A text unit was included when it contained not only the term itself but also any form of explicit or implicit elaboration of meaning. Elaborations included: (1) definitional statements, (2) descriptive paraphrases, (3) metaphorical or symbolic associations, (4) cultural justification, and (5) branding or promotional framing.

Thus, a single data unit could consist of a full sentence or a short paragraph, depending on how much contextual information the author provided. For example, the following sentence was identified as a unit because the term is immediately accompanied by cultural interpretation:

“We deliver **omotenashi**, a hospitality inspired by deep respect and anticipation of guests' needs.”

Units that contained the term without any surrounding explanation were excluded from further analysis, as the focus of the study is on the representation of cultural meaning rather than simple lexical appearance. When elaboration extended across multiple consecutive sentences, the entire stretch of text was coded as a single unit to avoid fragmentation that would obscure meaning construction.

2.2.2 Categorization of discourse strategies

Coding began with a deductive orientation, using discourse-strategy constructs adapted from van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor model, then refined inductively through repeated reading of the corpus. Categories are summarized below:

Table 3. Categorization of discourse strategies

Discourse Strategy	Linguistic Indicators	Illustrative Function
Loanword + descriptive paraphrase	“ <i>omotenashi</i> , meaning...”	Introduces cultural term without replacing it
Recontextualization	Aligning concept with global managerial values	Positions Japanese concept as universally applicable
Ideological/ Nation-branding stance	“Japanese approach,” “our cultural ethos,” “world-renowned hospitality”	Constructs cultural identity superiority and soft power

Thus, the research describes not only linguistic forms but also the cultural ideologies behind the preservation of Japanese terms in global business communication. To ensure the research's credibility, its validity was strengthened through source triangulation (corporate, media, tourism), an analytical audit trail (recording of coding and categorization processes), and the verification of cultural meanings through Japanese ethnography (Hendry, 2019; Nakane, 1974).

3 Results

Analysis of a corpus of 37 documents revealed that the terms *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* were consistently retained in their original Japanese forms throughout English-language business discourse. A total of 84 occurrences of these terms were identified, consisting of 31 instances of *omotenashi*, 28 of *ikigai*, and 25 of *senpai-kōhai*. Although the distribution is generally balanced, *omotenashi* appears most frequently in hospitality and tourism-related materials, *ikigai* is most prominent in business media and HR-focused publications, and *senpai-kōhai* is most common in corporate management documents. This distribution indicates that the terms tend to occur in field-specific contexts: *omotenashi* in relation to customer service values, *ikigai* regarding employee motivation and workplace meaning, and *senpai-kōhai* regarding the leadership and organisational culture.

Table 4: Distribution of Japanese Term Occurrences Across Business Discourse Contexts

Japanese Term	Number of Occurrences	Dominant Context of Appearance	Typical Document Types	Illustrative Business Theme
omotenashi	31	Hospitality & Tourism	Hotel websites, tourism brochures, sustainability reports	Customer service values and guest experience
ikigai	28	Business Media & HR / Workplace Culture	Business magazines, HR articles, leadership blogs	Employee motivation, meaning of work, life-work purpose
senpai-kōhai	25	Corporate Management & Organisational Culture	Corporate leadership reports, management strategy documents	Hierarchical leadership, loyalty, mutual responsibility

Across the corpus, the terms were never replaced with English lexical alternatives (e.g., hospitality, purpose, senior-junior), even when similar conceptual equivalents were available. Instead, each Japanese term was followed by brief English clarifications, indicating a consistent representational pattern in which lexical retention and contextual support operate simultaneously. For example, in a hospitality corporate document, *omotenashi* is retained and immediately elaborated through a descriptive phrase:

"We deliver **omotenashi**, a hospitality grounded in respect and sincere anticipation of guests' needs." (D1 – Hospitality Company, 2022)

Similarly, a business media article explained *ikigai* by retaining the original term and supporting it with a definition centred on employees' professional aspirations:

"Workers often find their **ikigai**, a deeply personal sense of purpose that connects life meaning with professional growth." (D2 – International Business Magazine, 2023)

A corporate leadership report also retained *senpai-kōhai* and clarified its implications relationally rather than structurally:

"Our leadership culture embraces the **senpai-kōhai** system, cultivating loyalty and mutual responsibility." (D3 – Automotive Corporate Report, 2021)

Beyond individual quotations, the corpus showed several recurrent textual patterns. First, the clarifications frequently appeared in proximity to the term, typically within the same sentence, and were commonly separated by commas, em-dashes, or relative clause markers. Second, the clarifications tended to highlight the practical applications of terms, such as behavioural expectations in service, personal meaning in work, or principles of hierarchical cooperation, rather than abstract definitions. Third, the Japanese terms were regularly placed in syntactically salient positions, including headlines, slogans, section headings, and thematic statements in corporate values sections, suggesting that their retention plays a deliberate representational role rather than emerging casually.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that the representation of *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* in English business discourse involves a consistent strategy of loanword retention combined with brief contextual paraphrasing. This approach enables the terms to retain their distinctly Japanese appearance while conveying their general meanings to international readers. The excerpts above illustrate how institutions provide concise English interpretive support to facilitate understanding without altering or substituting the original Japanese lexical forms.

4 Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Untranslatability and Cultural Density

This finding corroborates 12/13/2025 12:15:00 AM and Moran et al. (2014) findings that language in Japanese business contexts is used not merely as a means of transacting meaning but also as a tool for constructing a commercially valuable cultural image. The retention of Japanese cultural terms is closely related to the phenomenon of untranslatability, as proposed by Jakobson (2021), when a concept cannot be translated without losing its accompanying cultural meaning. In this case, *omotenashi* cannot be directly equated with hospitality, as the concept encompasses dimensions of humility, moral responsibility, and social harmony (Hendry, 2019; Ide & Hata, 2020). A literal translation has the potential to diminish the cultural values that shape the concept.

Untranslatability is also evident in the term *ikigai*, which for Japanese people carries meanings related to existential purpose, psychological well-being, and a sense of connection to others and the environment (Oe, 2025; Takahashi, 2025). Meanwhile, the *senpai-kōhai* relationship contains a network of social obligations and mutual loyalties that are not identical to the senior–junior structure in Western organizational culture (Kurihara, 2009; Qie et al., 2019; Sekiguchi et al., 2025).

Newmark (1988) refers to this phenomenon as a cultural gap, while Nida (2021) argues that equivalence of linguistic form without equivalence of cultural response will fail to achieve dynamic equivalence. Therefore, term retention is seen as a way to maintain the density of cultural meaning that is not easily transferred to English.

4.2 Discourse Strategies: Foreignization, Thick Translation, and Nation Branding

The retention of Japanese terms is not only a linguistic decision but also a discursive strategy. Yang (2010) calls this strategy foreignization, which occurs when foreign language elements are retained to maintain the foreignness of the source culture rather than adapting them to the cultural norms of the target language. This strategy is evident in various examples, including the following statement:

“Our global service vision is guided by the spirit of **omotenashi** .” (D4 – Tourism Promotion Document, 2020)

On the other hand, Appiah (1993) introduced the concept of thick translation, where the translation of cultural terms requires additional contextual explanation. This is reflected in the emergence of various glossaries accompanying Japanese terms in English-language documents. Furthermore, term retention is also linked to the nation branding strategy described by (Anholt, 2007; Kotler & Gertner, 2007) In global discourse, *omotenashi* plays a role in constructing the image of Japanese services as high-quality, *ikigai* in promoting a meaningful work ethic, and *senpai-kōhai* in establishing an image of social stability within Japanese organizations. These terms constitute symbolic capital, as described by Bourdieu (1991), namely cultural values that can be converted into reputation and profits in the global marketplace.

4.3 Intertextuality and the Circulation of Global Meaning

The findings of this study also indicate that the meanings of Japanese terms do not remain static but undergo intertextual processes (Fairclough, 1995). The term *ikigai*, for example, now appears not only in Japanese cultural discourse but has also been absorbed into Western discourse on management and productivity. In an article on work motivation, the following formulation was found:

“Leaders should help employees discover their **ikigai** to improve resilience and workplace satisfaction.” (D5 – Leadership and HR Journal, 2022)

While *omotenashi* is positioned as a service standard in promoting the Japanese tourism industry, and *senpai-kōhai* is positioned as a relational leadership model in Japanese multinational organizations. This process reflects the commodification of culture (Anderson, 2025; Bernt, 2022), namely when cultural values are transformed into economic assets that are marketed globally.

4.4 Synthesis of findings

Based on the overall analysis, it can be concluded that the retention of Japanese terms in English-language business discourse is both a linguistic phenomenon and a cultural identity strategy. First, retention occurs due to linguistic and cultural untranslatability, which renders English equivalents unable to convey the depth of Japanese cultural meaning. Second, strategies of foreignization and thick translation are employed to maintain the authenticity of the terms while ensuring their understanding by global readers. Third, these cultural terms serve as instruments of nation branding, strengthening Japan's image in the global market and creating economically advantageous symbolic capital. Fourth, the reproduction of meaning across discourses indicates that these terms undergo interpretive transformation as they spread across the global space. Thus, the use of *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* in international business discourse functions not only as lexical components but also as practices of cultural representation and commercial communication strategies.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that the retention of Japanese cultural terms—particularly *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai*—in English-language business discourse is not a random linguistic occurrence but a deliberate discursive practice. Rather than substituting these terms with English equivalents, authors and institutions consistently preserve the original lexical forms to maintain cultural meanings that would be diminished through translation. In line with Jakobson's concept of untranslatability, the study identifies these terms as possessing high cultural

and semantic density, making direct lexical substitution insufficient for conveying their embedded values.

The findings also show that the retained terms are frequently accompanied by contextual paraphrases that guide interpretation without sacrificing cultural authenticity, aligning with Appiah's notion of thick translation. This strategy demonstrates that foreignization is not merely a translation choice but a communicative technique that foregrounds cultural identity, enabling international audiences to recognize the Japanese origins of the concepts. Moreover, the persistent and patterned use of these terms across corporate communication, international business media, and tourism-oriented materials reveals their additional function as instruments of nation branding. In this sense, *omotenashi*, *ikigai*, and *senpai-kōhai* operate simultaneously as linguistic signifiers and symbolic assets that reinforce Japan's global image of superior service values, a meaningful work philosophy, and a relational organisational culture. Taken together, these findings show that the retention of Japanese terminology in English business discourse serves linguistic, cultural, and economic purposes. The study contributes to translation studies, intercultural business communication, and discourse analysis by demonstrating how language operates as a medium for preserving cultural knowledge while shaping international perceptions of national identity. In doing so, it highlights that translation practices in global business settings extend beyond the transfer of meaning: they participate in the construction and circulation of cultural capital in the global marketplace.

Disclosure Statement

The authors claim there is no conflict of interest.

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