

SPECIAL ARTICLE

The Interpretation Industry in Japan

Market changes, challenges, and new opportunities over five decades

Chikako Tsuruta
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
ctsuruta@tufs.ac.jp

ABSTRACT: This article examines the current situation of the interpretation industry in Japan. To aid the post-war reconstruction efforts, the Japan Productivity Center organized missions to the US. The interpreters needed for the missions were trained at the US Department of State. Upon their return to Japan, many of these interpreters became professional conference interpreters. Agencies were then set up to provide interpreters for the rapidly growing demand from the government and business. The interpreting agencies played a crucial role in establishing interpreting as a profession. Around this time, the business of conference interpreting also emerged with English as the main language. During the economic boom, interpreters had increasing opportunities to play an active role in the economy as demand from the private sector increased. As foreign companies began to expand into Japan, the number of in-house interpreters increased. Today, interpreters are employed in the government, private, academic, and media sectors, with approximately 80% of the interpretation being English-Japanese. According to the available statistics, the industry as a whole is dominated by small proprietorships that appear to be operated by individual interpreters. In addition to the large comprehensive agencies, a number of niche agencies have appeared in recent years that provide interpreting services for specific industry sectors. Regarding the career path of an interpreter, it is common for English interpreters to attend training institutions run by interpreting agencies and then become freelance interpreters. When training began in the mid-1970s, the courses were mainly attended by female

university students. However, increasing numbers of men are now participating in the industry, many of whom are older and have experience in other professions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for interpreters dropped significantly. Although this was only temporary, the pandemic hastened the shift towards online interpreting using IT. Today, interpreters have further opportunities to utilize machine translation tools. Making active use of the technologies available, the interpretation industry in Japan is becoming more diverse and fulfilling its roles in a more diversified setting.

KEYWORDS: interpretation, conference interpreting, interpretation industry, interpreting agency, interpreter's career path

抄録: この論文は、日本の通訳業界の現状を考察するものである。戦後の復興活動を支援するために、日本生産性本部はアメリカへの代表団を派遣した。任務に必要な通訳者は米国国務省で訓練を受けた。これらの通訳者の多くは日本に帰国後、会議通訳者として活動した。政府や企業からの急速に高まる需要に応じて通訳者を養成する通訳エージェンシーが設立された。会議通訳は英語と日本語間を中心として始まり、その発展には通訳エージェンシーが重要な役割を果たした。経済発展のもとでは民間需要も高まり、通訳者が活躍する機会も増えた。外資系企業の日本進出に伴い、社内通訳者の数も増加した。現在、政府、民間、学術、メディア部門で通訳者が活躍しており、通訳の約80%は英日通訳である。入手可能な統計によると、業界全体としては、個人の通訳者によって運営されていると思われる小規模な事業主が多数を占めている。大手の総合的な通訳エージェンシーに加え、近年は特定の業界分野に通訳サービスを提供する特化型エージェンシーが登場している。通訳者のキャリアパスとしては、英語通訳者は通訳エージェンシーが運営する養成機関に通い、その後フリー通訳者になるのが一般的である。1970年代半ばに通訳エージェンシーが運営する養成機関が始まった当初は、女子の大学生が多く受講していた。しかし、現在ではこの業界により年齢が上で他の職業を経験した後に参入する男性の数が増えている。コロナ禍の影響により、通訳の需要は一時大幅に減少したが、これは一時的なものにとどまった。コロナ禍を経験したことによりITを活用したオンライン通訳への移行が加速した。今日、通訳者は機械翻訳ツールを利用する機会がさらに増えている。日本の通訳業界はテクノロジーを積極的に活用し、多様性を増し、より多様な現場でその役割を果たしている。

キーワード: 通訳、会議通訳、通訳産業、通訳エージェンシー、通訳者のキャリアパス

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a general overview of the current situation of interpretation in Japan. The discussion is guided by changes the author has witnessed over the decades since she first became involved in interpretation during her university studies in the 1970s. In February 1975, after responding to an advertisement posted on her university bulletin board, the author travelled to Hokkaido, Japan to begin her first assignment as an interpreter for an international ice hockey tournament. The author had completed part of her education in the United States (US) and wanted to follow a career in which she could use her language skills. In 1975, the interpretation industry in Japan was starting to grow and interpreters were in short supply. This author went on to become a professional conference interpreter.

Few studies have examined the history and development of the Japanese interpreting industry in Japanese, let alone in English. The literature in Japanese is limited to a PhD study on the interpretation industry in Japan by Azusa Sato (2004), two translation and interpretation white papers published by the Japan Translation Federation (JTF) and an industry journal released annually by Ikaros Publications. The literature in English comprises a paper on interpretation training in Japan (Takeda, 2012) and a recent survey study on remote interpreting in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic (Matsushita, 2022). This paper aims to add to this small body of research by providing an overview of the development of the Japanese interpretation industry leading up to the current situation. Interpretation is an industry that has been developed by the people associated with it. Taking an autoethnographic approach, the analysis presented in this paper is guided by the author's own experience. After examining the development of the industry from an insider's perspective, the author reflects on the changes that have led to the current state of things and possible future directions the industry might take.

2. Overview

2.1 General Considerations

The first Japanese simultaneous interpreters to work in diplomacy and for government were those who were trained by the US Department of State after

the war (Sato, 2004). After its defeat in World War Two, Japan was occupied by the Allied Forces under the command of the General Headquarters (GHQ). As part of the postwar economic aid package, the US implemented a comprehensive business training program to boost Japanese industry. The program included tours of US facilities that were conducted in collaboration with Japan's Productivity Center, one of the pioneering think tanks in Japan after WWII. In collaboration with leading US companies, Japanese business and industrial figures travelled to the US to receive training from US experts. The Japanese delegates were accompanied by Japanese interpreters who received training from the US State Department. The job postings for interpreters attracted thousands of applicants, including many of the Japanese staff working at GHQ. After undergoing training with the State Department, the interpreters accompanied Japanese business leaders on their tours of US facilities and played a key role in communicating the management, production control, and marketing information that would help Japan's postwar reconstruction efforts. On their return, these Japanese interpreters established the profession of simultaneous interpreting in Japan, especially in the public and diplomatic fields.

From the start, English was the key language that required interpretation in Japan. The interpreters who participated in the Japan Productivity Center-led mission to the US were all Japanese-English interpreters. Still today, English is the most frequently used language in conference interpreting in Japan, with the English-Japanese language combination—in Japan interpreters customarily work from both Japanese to English and from English to Japanese—accounting for approximately 80 percent of the market (Sato, 2004). For instance, only Japanese-English interpreters attend multilateral summit meetings such as the G7 or G20. When interpreting for other languages is required at events such as these, it is done through English as a pivot. Moreover, unlike the European-language markets, Japanese-language interpreters follow the practices used in other Asian markets by also working in the B language. According to a survey conducted by the Japan Translation Federation, other often used languages are Chinese, Korean, German, French, Spanish, and Italian (Japan Translation Federation, 2023). Japanese to English interpreters also accompany missions to the International Labor Organization (ILO). In this case, the interpreters are required to become members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), since AIIC membership is necessary to be recognized as a qualified

interpreter in Europe.

The demand for interpreters also increased when Japan joined the United Nations in 1956 and returned to the international community. In the 1950s and 60s, this demand was filled by the first generation of interpreters who had been trained by the State Department. The public market and diplomacy were the main fields of activity during this time. As the Japanese economy began to expand, the private sector began to generate increased demand for conference interpreters, especially those with sufficient skills to interpret simultaneously. Over time, other opportunities began to arise, especially in academia and the media. The development of broadcast television and the capacity for live coverage was a significant catalyst in this regard. Today, technology continues to shape the practice of interpretation and the possibilities for its evolution. In the post-COVID era remote simultaneous interpretation has quickly become a large part of the private and public markets. AI is also influencing the practice of interpretation, and presenting both challenges and opportunities for the industry.

2.2 Role of Interpreting Agencies

Historically, the Japanese market was shaped by the establishment of a number of key interpreting agencies that remain the dominant forces in the industry today (Takeda, 2012). By the time the Japan Productivity Center's US mission ended in 1962, large numbers of experienced interpreters had returned to their home country, with many going on to become the first professional interpreters in Japan. They were often asked to interpret for government organizations and industry leaders. In addition to Japan's growing economy and entry into the world market, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics generated a rapid increase in demand for interpreters. In response to this growing demand, in the mid-1960s a number of interpreting agencies were established to ensure the availability of a reliable pool of interpreters and to serve as trustworthy event organizers. Simul International Inc. was started by a group of all male interpreters in 1965.

Two other agencies that formed around the same time as Simul are ISS Inc. and Inter Group Corp. ISS was originally founded by a group of language experts to address the business needs of the Tokyo Olympics. In 1966, ISS established an interpreter training school. Inter Group was founded in Osaka in 1970 to mainly cater to the business needs of the Osaka Expo. Japan

Convention Services (JCS), another large interpreting agency, was founded in 1967.

The interpreting businesses that started in those early days still continue to this day. To begin with, in setting their interpreter fees, the agencies followed the practices of international organizations such as the AIIC. As a result, the fee structure was the same for all the agencies, with one set rate per day. However, from around 1967 a two-tier fee structure was introduced that reflected the level of experience and skill of the interpreter. In this case, A rank interpreters charged the existing rate while B rank interpreters charged about half the fee (Sato, 2004). This change was followed by further categorizations that resulted in the current unique interpreter fee structure in Japan.

Today, interpreters are generally ranked into three categories: A, B, and C (or G, meaning general). However, the corresponding fee structure is different for each interpreting agency. Some agencies such as Simul and JCS include an S rank above the A rank. According to JCS, S rank is used to denote exceptional A rank interpreters who have a long track record of success in one area. A rank includes interpreters with over 10 years of experience who are capable of interpreting at specialized seminars. In turn, B rank indicates five years of experience and a capacity to interpret for in-house meetings, receptions, and greetings, whereas C rank interpreters have over one year of experience and are suitable for escorting VIPs and attending exhibitions. The agencies charge set fees for the different ranks. For instance, JCS charges JPY 130,000 per day for S, 110,000 for A, 85,000 for B, and 50,000 for C, with the half day rate being 70% of each (interpreter fee information from Japan Convention Services, 2024). It should be noted that each agency determines its own rates and ranks. Interpreting agencies charge between 20 to 50 percent as their margins (Sato, 2004). There are also no qualification exams for interpreters or national standards set by the industry or public authorities. Nonetheless, these rates and ranks are accepted by interpreters as the basis for setting fees and determining working conditions. The remuneration for individual interpreters varies based on their contracts with individual agencies.

For the agencies that have their own interpreter training schools such as Simul, Inter Group, and ISS, interpreter trainees who successfully complete their training tend to be hired and to then progress through the ranks. On the other hand, freelance interpreters are usually required to sit a screening test

before being included on the roster. Accordingly, the interpreting agencies through which interpretation developed as a profession remain the dominant force in the industry and in the provision of training.

Today, the main agencies in the industry employ large numbers of staff and provide a wide range of interpretation services. For instance, Simul International Inc. states that it has a roster of over 2,000 interpreters registered with the agency and employs around 50 interpreters on exclusive contracts covering numerous fields and languages. According to its English website, Simul provides:

... highly professional interpreting service in politics, medicine, IR, energy, IT, law, and many other specialized fields to support a wide range of needs from top-level meetings by cabinet members and senior government officials and international conferences of global associations / corporations to individual interviews and in-house training sessions (Simul, 2024b).

In later sections, more details are discussed in relation to the public and private markets based on the knowledge the author gained in talking with a number of interpreter colleagues.

2.3 Size and Scope of the Interpretation Industry in Japan

A broad measure for estimating the demand for interpretation services in Japan is the number of foreign visitors that enter the country each year. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of foreign visitors reached a record high of nearly 32 million in 2019, before declining rapidly due to the travel restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2024). After the travel restrictions were relaxed, the numbers of foreign visitors steadily recovered, with the visitor arrivals in October 2023 surpassing the corresponding figures for October 2019. However, although the increasing numbers of visitors is likely to correlate with greater demand for interpreting services, the growing visitor arrivals is more indicative of an expanding tourism market than a growing need for interpreters. When this author was a university student, the major interpreting agencies had offices at major hotels to cater to the needs of business customers. However, individual business clients comprise a small portion of the overall demand for interpreting services. Moreover, these

customers tend to be both domestic and international and it is not possible to estimate their numbers based solely on visitor arrivals. While the numbers of foreign visitors may suggest a trend, a more relevant statistic for the interpreting market is the number of international conferences held in Japan.

According to the JNTO, the number of international conferences held in Japan has been steadily increasing every year for over a decade, except for 2011, the year of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the figures reached a record high of 3,621 conferences (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2024). However, JNTO data are designed to capture the trend of the numbers of international conferences, not for estimating the size of the interpreting industry (Sato, 2004). Moreover, the JNTO figures do not include conferences hosted by private sector companies and organizations, which industry experts estimate could comprise as much as half of the conference market. Conventions are an important source of revenue for large hotels for they are able to charge for banquet and other services in addition to accommodation. Accordingly, competition is fierce amongst hotels to capture this sector of the market. Before COVID-19, major hotels were packed with conferences during the peak season, with temporary interpreting booths set up in addition to the conference halls with fixed interpreting booths. Anecdotally, colleagues have reported that 2023 was the busiest conference interpreting season they have experienced, which suggests the industry is returning to normal.

Published by the Japan Translation Federation in June 2023, “Honyaku Tsūyaku Hakusyo” [2022 Translation and Interpretation White Paper] provides a closer look at the current state of the translation and interpreting industry in Japan (Japan Translation Federation, 2023). The White Paper is based on the Seventh Translation and Interpretation Survey, which canvassed 118 companies in the interpreting industry, with the answers collected and analyzed through a third party. Interpreting income includes rental fees for interpreting equipment, though the survey does not include convention management, interpreter education, or temporary staff costs. Of the 118 companies surveyed, 71.2% or 84 companies reported having less than JPY 10 million in sales, 9.3% or 11 companies responded having between 10 million to less than JPY 30 million, 4.2% or 5 companies between 30 million to less than 50 million, and 5.9% or 7 companies between 50 to below 100 million. Overall, this means that 80.5% or 95 of the companies had sales of less than JPY 30 million and 90.6% or 107 companies had sales of less than

JPY 100 million. The numbers of companies were obtained by multiplying the percentage by 118.

For the companies earning more than JPY 100 million, 3.4% or 4 companies had sales of between 100 million and less than 300 million, 1.7% or 2 companies between 300 million and less than 500 million, 1.7% or 2 companies between 500 million and less than JPY 1 billion, 0.8% or 1 company between JPY 1 billion and less than JPY 1.5 billion, 0.8% or 1 company between 1.5 billion and less than JPY 2 billion and 0.8% or 1 company over JPY 2 billion. Thus, while there are clearly some large players in the interpretation industry, the majority who responded to the survey were small players. This is probably due to the fact that the A class interpreters established in the industry tend to set up their own companies and provide their own agency services. A number of the interpreting agencies that were established in the early days continue to this day. In addition, some of the current agencies were set up in the 1980s and 1990s by interpreters who left the established agencies when the industry was growing. A number of these companies focused on specific industries or sectors of their strength and have gone on to become major agencies. As the larger agencies have to cover the high fixed costs associated with having offices in central urban areas and maintaining teams of marketing and sales staff, they generally charge higher margins than the smaller boutique agencies set up by individual interpreters. Moreover, interpreters who set up their own agencies can communicate directly with their clients and be more flexible in setting their fees. However, as these agencies are not listed companies, it is not possible to gain financial information on their businesses.

One notable event that resulted in a significant shift in the industry is the bankruptcy of Simul International Inc. in November 1997. It was widely believed at the time that Simul's demise was due to mismanagement as it had invested too much in its loss-making publishing arm. The interpreting agency business, however, was doing well. In 1998, it was acquired and incorporated into Benesse Corporation, whose main business was providing home-study education for children up until high school age and publishing teaching materials. Under Benesse, a listed company, Simul's financial report was included as part of the other business segment, so its results were not disclosed independently. In March 2020, Simul came under the management of Takara & Company, whose main business is printing financial documents. Under Takara & Company, Simul is part of the translation and interpretation

Figure 1: Convention business

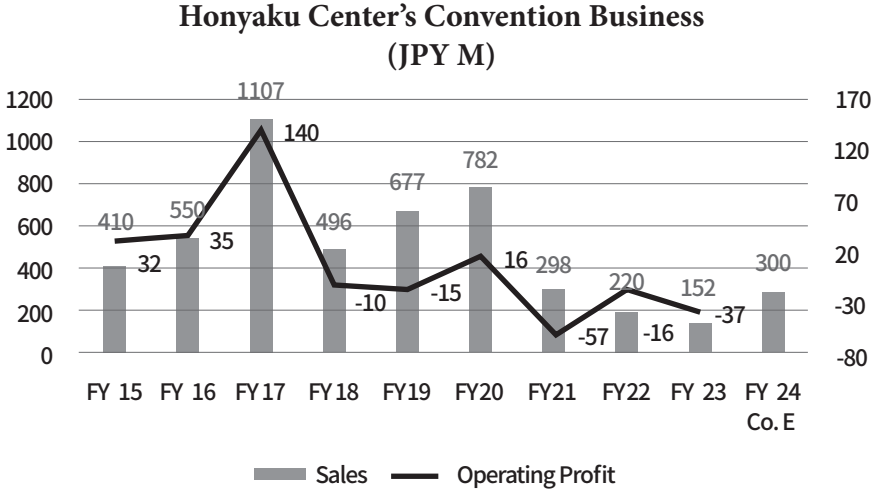
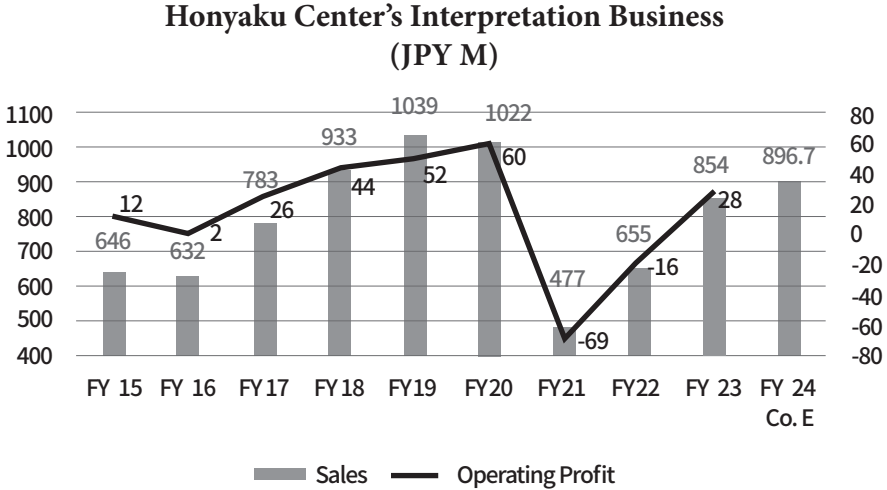


Figure 2: Interpretation business



business segment, which also includes the translation company Toin, which was acquired in February 2019. According to Takara & Company's financial statements, in the three years from 2021 to 2023, the combined revenue of Simul and Toin increased steadily from JPY 5,810 million in 2021 to JPY 6,676 million in 2022 and JPY 7,819 million in 2023 (Takara & Company, 2024). Although these figures cover both the translation and interpretation sectors, it is evident that business is steadily increasing overall.

Another listed company that can provide insights into the state of the interpreting industry is Honyaku Center, which manages one of the major interpreting agencies, ISS Inc. The convention business includes the planning and organization of international conferences, seminars, symposia, and exhibitions. As shown in Figures 1 and 2 above, the data from Honyaku Center's financial statements show that sales and operating profits have begun to recover for both the convention and interpretation business sectors following COVID-19 (this information together with the two graphs shown in Figures 1 and 2 are from Honyaku Center (2024)). As can be expected, the convention business declined dramatically during the COVID-19 restrictions.

In contrast, the interpretation business, which includes conference interpretation revenue from corporate customers and international conferences, shows an increasing trend immediately after the restrictions on travel and public gatherings were imposed in 2020.

Notably, the interpretation business shows an improvement in sales, on the left-hand scale, from roughly JPY 655 million as of fiscal 2022 (ending March 2022) to JPY 855 million in fiscal 2023 (ending March 2023). The operating profit shown on the right-hand scale shows an improvement from negative 16 million in fiscal 2022 to 28 million in fiscal 2023. Overall, these figures show that the demand for interpretation remains strong and is set to return to the pre-pandemic levels in the near future.

3. The Various Interpretation Markets in Japan

3.1 Public Market

Public organizations such as government ministries and the diplomatic corps are major clients of interpreters. These important organizations determine Japan's national policies and engage in international diplomacy. The

interpreters required for this type of work are carefully selected. Government ministries and agencies either use their own staff to act as interpreters or hire outside interpreters through interpreting agencies. Internal staff may undertake consecutive interpreting. However, outside interpreters need to be hired for international conferences requiring simultaneous interpreting. With their long standing ties with government ministries and embassies, the established interpreting agencies have an edge in the public market. A number of more recently established interpreting agencies have connections with politicians.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs trains its own interpreters in various languages through a school attached to the Ministry. Interpreters are then selected from within its ranks to interpret for key figures such as the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, high ranking government officers, and members of the Royal Family. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense also send prospective interpreters to interpreting agency schools for training. However, the officials who provide interpreting services for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs do not hold career positions as interpreters and eventually move on to other jobs in the ministry.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), and Ministry of Finance are important clients of interpreting agencies. For example, METI may require interpreters to interpret discussions conducted in Japanese for foreign guest speakers at the Industrial Structure Council's Manufacturing Industries Committee. The Ministry of Finance may require interpreters for important press announcements. Most governmental projects are assigned on public bidding. As part of the bidding process, interpreting agencies send interpreters on their roster to take a test at a governmental agency that will likely involve consecutive interpreting in both English-to-Japanese and Japanese-to-English directions. It may be the case that each year more than one interpreting agency will be assigned as eligible to receive jobs from a specific governmental agency.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, numerous ministerial-level talks, bilateral meetings, visits by foreign dignitaries, and meetings by high-ranking officials take place on a daily basis. Every Tuesday and Friday, Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa gives a press conference which is streamed online with interpretation into English (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The Prime Minister's Office of Japan website also provides publicly accessible information that is interpreted into English. Since the 2011

earthquake, the Chief Cabinet Minister has provided daily press conferences in the morning and again in the afternoon. The press conferences are accessible on the website with English and sign language interpretations. Japanese into English interpreters and two Japanese sign language interpreters are assigned to the task every weekday.

The diplomatic corps in Tokyo also use their own interpreters in certain cases either through staff who work exclusively as interpreters or others who perform interpreting when needed. In some instances the corps will use the services of outside freelance interpreters on an ad hoc basis or dispatched from an interpreting agency on a temporary basis. The US embassy in Japan now employs a Japanese interpreter who serves as a regular employee within the embassy. Until recently, Japanese-English interpreters were brought over from the United States. However, one interpreter who passed the test prior to the current ambassador arriving in Tokyo is now employed full-time. She is eligible to stay until retirement even when the current ambassador returns home. The EU delegation in Japan also employs a Japanese-English interpreter for the ambassador as a regular staff member.

3.2 Private Market

The private sector market can be roughly divided into two segments, namely freelance interpreters and in-house or staff interpreters. Freelance interpreters engage in quite a wide range of work. For instance, the Simul website lists nine fields of interpretation in addition to the “Politics and Diplomacy” field already discussed in the previous section (Simul, 2024a). The nine fields cover “Business Administration,” with sub-categories in management policy briefings, board meetings, management strategy meetings, and town hall meetings, “Public Relations and IR,” “M&A,” “Financial Services,” “Medical and Pharmaceuticals,” “Law and Legal Affairs,” “Environment/Energy,” “Education (University),” and “Events,” with subcategories such as trade shows, business matching events, media events, press interviews, and receptions. IT is not specifically listed here but there are other interpreting agencies that are strong in IT. A number of interpreting agencies focusing on IT were established in the 1980s and gained assignments to work with the sales and marketing staff of the major IT companies.

Investor relations (IR) is a major area that requires many interpreters. The Simul website lists earnings presentations, shareholder meetings, road

shows abroad and in Japan, securities company conferences, and investor presentations as areas employing large numbers of freelance interpreters. When Japanese companies conduct road shows abroad to attract investors, the company executives typically conduct their presentations in English. However, even in these cases interpreters may be hired to work on standby. In such cases, the interpreters are often also employed as communication experts knowledgeable in inter-cultural communication (Sato, 2004). IR is another large segment of the private market and comprises a major part of the business of a number of interpreting agencies.

Two significant events in the private sector market are also notable for the interpretation resources they required. In 1997, Yamaichi Securities was acquired by Merrill Lynch after it went bankrupt during the financial crisis. At the height of this amalgamation effort, as many as 20 interpreters were recruited and assigned various tasks. When financial institutions and large international companies get into difficulty numerous interpreters are often required to work with foreign managers and foreign investment companies. Another event which required many interpreters was Oriental Land's plan to set up a Disneyland in Chiba, a suburb of Tokyo, in 1991. In this case, numerous interpreters were recruited to facilitate the negotiations with Disneyland in relation to building the facilities and training staff. A number of the interpreters who worked on this project went on to become professional freelance interpreters.

Following the relaxation of Japan's foreign control and ownership laws, increasing numbers of Japanese companies began to be acquired by foreign companies. Today, over 30% of the companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange are foreign owned, compared to only a few percentage points half a century ago. This shift also reflects the increasing numbers of companies that now require in-house interpreters.

Foreign ownership of Japanese companies is a major reason why companies employ staff to work as in-house interpreters. Disney still has a pool of regular in-house interpreters. Other companies that employ in-house interpreters include major IT companies, pharmaceutical companies, beverage companies, and consulting companies. In some cases, interpreters are only required for a limited amount of time, such as when foreign companies acquire Japanese firms. There are instances in which simultaneous interpreting booths have been set up at such companies. However, after the pandemic, the use of remote interpreting has made it easier for freelance

interpreters to work from home (Matsushita, 2022). Moreover, online platforms have made it possible for freelance interpreters to join in-house interpreters to provide simultaneous interpretation for internal company meetings (information on online interpreting from Inter Group, 2024).

3.3 Media and Academia

Media, entertainment, and sports are other areas that employ specialized interpreters. Broadcast interpreting, which started around 1990, is one area that requires specialization. In Japan, the NHK International Training Institute provides training in this area. Sport is another genre requiring specialized interpreters, especially for popular events such as the Rugby World Cup and Major League Baseball, which attract significant media attention and public interest. Press conferences held by athletes and athletics organizations also provide opportunities for media interpreters to interpret on screen. The Academy Awards ceremony, major film festivals, and Nobel prize announcements are also keenly watched events on TV in Japan. The interpretation of events such as these was initiated by conference interpreters in 1990 at NHK BS (Broadcast by Satellite). Over the years, media interpretation has emerged as a specialized field alongside conference interpreting. Interview programs and TV shows that feature foreign guests such as well-known scholars or politicians delivering important speeches are regularly shown on TV with simultaneous interpreting.

Academia is another area in which considerable numbers of interpreters are employed. Interpreters are often hired for graduation ceremonies where embassy staff and parents of foreign students attend, to assist in the delivery of courses by interpreting Japanese lectures into English, and to assist in research exchange meetings. National universities such as the University of Tokyo, Tohoku University, and Tokyo Institute of Technology and private universities such as Keio University, Waseda University, and Sophia University often hold symposia on diverse topics ranging from art to science. During the COVID-19 pandemic many of these seminars and symposia began to be held online. This practice has persisted beyond the pandemic and interpreters are often employed to make the symposia accessible to an international audience.

4. Interpreter's Career Paths

4.1 General Considerations

The profile of interpreters has changed considerably over the years. As this group is over 80% female, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act passed in 1986 was an important change that pushed aspiring female entrants away from the interpreting market to pursuing careers at major companies including those under foreign ownership. Before this legislation was passed, Japanese companies tended to hire university recruits with different career tracks for male and female interpreters. When this differential hiring practice was officially banned, more women aspired to have careers in the corporate sector.

The changes in the profiles of those attending interpreting agency related schools also show that university students no longer comprise the major pool of recruits. In the 1970s and 80s, students trained at International Christian University under Mitsuko Saito were the major source of aspiring interpreters. In those days, when the industry was starting to grow very rapidly, there was strong demand for interpreters but a limited supply. As a result, even young newly trained female students who had experience living or studying abroad were able to enter the industry. Interpreting was quite an attractive option at that time.

As its name suggests, the International Hospitality and Conference Service Organization (IHCSA) provides conference interpreters of all languages not just English and services such as airport pick-ups and transportation for international guests.¹ While a university student, this author registered with this agency as an escort interpreter and then, after gaining experience, as a conference interpreter. Other government ministries that have in-house interpreters and translators can serve as entry points for university and graduate students straight out of school. For instance, the Ministry of Defense hires staff for interpreting and translation, and there have been cases where staff have moved on to become freelance interpreters.

Each year, Ikaros Publications releases a magazine that focuses on the job market and employment opportunities in the interpretation and translation industry. A recent article included an interview with a middle-aged man

1 Official website: <https://www.ihcsa.or.jp/eng/>.

working for an IT company who wanted to make a move to broadcast interpreting and decided to study at the NHK International Training Institute (Ikaros Publications, 2023). This simple scenario offers insights into the changing profile of aspiring interpreters. Half a century ago, those aspiring interpreters would have had overseas living experience, their fathers would have likely worked as diplomats or for a major bank or trading company, and they would have started training in their college days. Today, according to the administrators at the interpreting schools, middle-aged men and women who decide to make a career change are the majority. Moreover, according to the Seventh Translation and Interpretation Survey Report (Japan Translation Federation, 2023), for fiscal year 2022, the breakdown based on age group shows that of the 138 surveyed, 27.5% were in their 40s and 37.7% in their 50s, meaning that those in their 40s and 50s comprised 65.2% or nearly two thirds of the total. There were also 2.9% in their 20s and the same number in their 70s. There were 14.5% in their 30s and the same number in their 60s. Overall, the statistics show that in 2022, the average interpreter was aged in their early 50s. Interpreting is evidently a career that requires significant training and experience.

4.2 Diverse Career Paths

There are various paths to becoming an interpreter and to work as an interpreter. One way is to train at an interpreting agency school and then work for that agency under an exclusive contract. Simul employs around 50 interpreters on exclusive contracts. Inter Group also has interpreters on exclusive contract, though the number is not as large as Simul's.

The average career path of a conference interpreter in the case of Japanese-English combination can be described as follows. First, it is not customary for young university or agency-school graduates to be assigned to conference interpreting jobs right away. It is more customary for them to take in-house interpreting positions. The three largest in-house positions that they may take are IT-related, pharmaceutical-related, and finance-related. The interpreters may then stay on as in-house interpreters for as long as between five to ten years to gain work experience and complete job assignments they can indicate on their resumes. After gaining experience, they may try to register with a major interpreting agency. Before doing so, more often than not the interpreters will attend advanced classes at an interpreter agency-

related school to hone their skills.

Agency-related schools usually offer three or four levels of classes, such as beginners, intermediary, advanced, and professional. Each class is offered once or twice a week and lasts for between two and three hours. Students need to pass the professional level classes before they can take assignments. Some students attend multiple schools before making their professional debut. For example, a student might attend one school geared towards conference interpreting and another with an emphasis on media interpreting. Some interpreting agency-related schools discourage students from becoming overly acquainted with a particular company or sector, as this will likely result in them lacking the broad knowledge and vocabulary required for conference interpreting. Interpreters who take on different assignments every day, even if some of the assignments are menial, tend to gain more of the knowledge and vocabulary required for conference interpreting.

The Japan Association of Conference Interpreters (JACI) was established in 2015 by interpreters to serve the interests of interpreters. JACI hosts the Japan Interpreter Forum (JIF) each summer to provide lectures and workshops. JACI also hosts the Simultaneous Interpreting Grand-Prix, an interpreting contest for university or graduate school students and freelancers with less than five years' experience. Both experienced interpreters and interpreting agency managers serve as judges. Performing well in this contest is one way to gain attention. JACI also includes an "Interpreter Search" function on its website for those looking for assignments (Japan Association of Conference Interpreters, 2024a).

The JACI website also publishes essays in which practicing interpreters tell their stories of how they became professional interpreters (Japan Association of Conference Interpreters, 2024b). There are currently 36 stories on the JACI website in Japanese. According to the organizer, the website started out as a forum for interpreters who were out of work during COVID-19. From the stories it is evident that all of the writers had somebody that they perceived as a role model in the industry. Well-known interpreters who publish essays or appear in industry magazines can serve as such role models. Moreover, in media interpreting the names of the interpreters usually appear on the screen, thus providing another model for aspiring interpreters.

The flexibility in being able to set one's own working schedule is an often-mentioned attraction of being a freelance interpreter. However, to become successful in the industry, professional conference interpreters need

to possess sufficient management skills to organize their own schedule and secure enough assignments without lowering the quality of their output. Aside from the small pool of conference interpreters who are on exclusive contracts, the business model of a freelance interpreter centers on the need to acquire assignments with increasingly attractive remuneration as they move up the ranks. The competition in the market requires each interpreter to constantly monitor their professional development.

5. Challenges and Outlook

5.1 Impact of COVID-19

Needless to say, the impact of COVID-19 was quite severe in Japan. In some cases, freelance interpreters had to rely on government subsidies after seeing their schedule going totally blank. For some interpreters and interpreting agencies, it meant it was time to close their business. According to the “2020 Translation and Interpretation White Paper, 6th Translation and Interpretation Survey Report” published by the Japan Translation Federation in April 2021, the pandemic had a serious impact on the interpretation market (Japan Translation Federation, 2021). Of the 65 companies that responded to the survey, 63.8% saw their interpretation sales decrease by 10% or more and 46.1% of them saw their sales decrease by 40% or more. In particular, 20 of the 27 companies with sales of JPY 10 million or more experienced sales declines of 40% or more.

With COVID-19 and the increasing use of remote interpreting, those who could not keep up with the technological aspects of remote interpreting were forced to drop out of the market altogether and to end their interpreting careers. Nonetheless, the increasing use of remote interpreting technology has had a positive impact in that it has reduced the need to travel and thus cut the expenses for the providers of assignments. It has also increased the supply of work in the market. In the process, the profile of the pool of interpreters responding to this demand has changed. In addition to the increasing opportunities to engage in remote interpreting, online interpreters are able to accept work from overseas agencies. Whereas before the pandemic interpreters in Japan typically charged half day and one day rates, interpreters now increasingly charge hourly rates.

However, COVID-19 did not only influence the volume of work available but also the quality of the work and method of how interpreting is done. When interpreting for the NHK World JAPAN coverage of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Peace Memorial ceremonies, this author provided simultaneous interpretation into English in the NHK studio in Tokyo rather than going on site to Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Tsuruta, 2022). This author also interpreted for a major governmental conference that was streamed online without any audience from a vast conference hall. At another event this author attended, the interpreters' voices were used to generate subtitles shown on screen for a fan event for an animation voice actors' talk show on *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*. Another session was held at a different site for Chinese language subtitling. This case provides a further reminder that interpretation and translation are getting closer, especially with the increasing use of technology.

5.2 Impact of Tools and Technology

The use of remote interpreting technology has expanded the ways in which simultaneous interpreting can be performed. The ability to work from home and thus reduce travel time has also made it possible for interpreters to take on more assignments per day. In recent years, the way interpreters work has also undergone major changes. The interpreters that this author talks to or works with on a regular basis make active use of machine translation, generative AI, or whatever tools that they can use to help in their work. It is now common to take tablet computers, sometimes two, to on-site assignments to get last minute updates and to search the Internet. The preparation time for interpreting assignments can sometimes be cut in half by first applying machine translation to get a general idea of the text. After the pandemic, small assignments such as interpreting earnings announcements for a company website have become a fixture. Inter Group now charges a special interpreting fee for two hours work which did not exist before COVID-19. According to its website, Inter Group handles 5000 online interpreting assignments a year, the largest in the industry, and provides services for pharmaceutical, manufacturing, and financial companies, as well as governmental organizations and academia. In both the private and public sectors, the use of remote interpreting in seminars and information meeting is now here to stay.

Overall, the biggest opportunities are to be found in the biggest

challenges. Remote interpreting technology, in this respect, poses new challenges as well as opportunities. Although it requires some investment on the part of the interpreter in regards to a suitably fast Internet connection and a PC or tablet, along with a backup in case one fails, interpreters can comfortably work at home. In a 24 hour world interpreters can now find work all around the globe. As long as one does not mind working in the middle of the night, remote workers in Japan can interpret for international online conferences, which is one change that has continued after the pandemic. In this regard, new tools such as automatic speech recognition applications that can generate subtitles can help improve efficiency, and make life a lot easier for an interpreter working alone from home. As abovementioned, it is now generally the case that interpreters will use AI machine translation to get the general idea of a text when preparing for an assignment. Needless to say, the interpreter still needs to have the ability to recognize according to the context whether that the machine translation is correct or appropriate. After all, interpreters need to pay attention to non-verbal cues that may give insights into how the speaker is actually conveying the message. In this regard, remote interpreting poses a challenge as it is often the case that only a partial image of the speaker is available and the audio quality may not be ideal.

6. Concluding Remarks

Reflecting on the journey that interpretation as a profession has taken since WWII, two things stand out. First, the development of interpretation as a profession played an integral role in Japanese diplomacy and helped Japan rejoin the international business community. The Japanese-English interpreters who were trained at the US Department of State facilitated communication between government officials and business leaders alike. With Japan's rapid economic development, the mostly government and diplomatic work in the early days was accompanied by increasing demand from business and industry leaders. Agency-related interpreter training schools were set up to fill the growing demand for conference interpreters. Second, these efforts directly led to the development of interpretation as a profession in Japan. The subsequent emergence of the various interpreting agencies helped further shape the new profession and was instrumental in providing quality interpretation. From the post war days, English was the key language and

it still is today. The interpreting agencies that were instrumental in shaping the industry continue to play a dominant role, although new players have appeared that focus on specific industries, such as IT or IR. Overall, the various interpreting agencies are a strong point of entry for new interpreters. The interpreting agency schools also play a major role in screening aspiring interpreters. As mentioned in the introduction, interpretation is an industry that has been developed by the people associated with it.

Interpretation as a profession continues to evolve with Japan's standing in the political and economic worlds. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly presented challenges to the interpretation industry as it led to a halt in on-site conference interpreting. However, the available remote interpreting technology soon enabled a new style of interpretation to emerge in which interpreters could connect with the world from their homes. The development of AI has impacted the interpreting industry in different ways. The fusion of people and cutting-edge technologies is required. The job of interpreting should not be seen to be in competition with such cutting-edge technology, but rather as seeking ways to use AI for the interpreter and the industry's advantage. Today, with the rise of AI and machine translation, a new era of interpretation is emerging in which interpreters can make more efficient use of their skills and expertise.

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Professional Profile

Chikako Tsuruta began her career as a conference and broadcast interpreter after working in the financial industry for ten years. She received her MBA from Columbia University, USA. Having led a Graduate School Interpretation Course for 15 years as a professor, she now is Professor Emerita at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include media interpreting, interpreter and translator training, and the subject of Japanglish. Her recent publications are “Japanglish from an Interpreter’s Perspective” (2020) and “Thoughts on Broadcast Interpreting” (2022).