

# Introduction to Translation and Interpreting Careers

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This is a 2025 update of a career presentation I gave to JET personnel back in 2004. Much of it remains valid, but the drastic changes in the outlook for prospective translators calls for some reflection on where we are, and I have modified the presentation accordingly.

Portions that no longer apply are ~~stricken through~~ and additions are presented in orange in slides.

# Your Speaker: The Past

- US Navy cryptologic technician (known as a communications technician at the time; specialty: Russian), mentioned because it underscores the importance of good fortune. That position brought me to Japan.
- Became an electrical engineer and worked in a fiber optics laboratory.
- Branch manager of a US electronics firm in Japan

# Your Speaker: The Present

- Patent and industrial translator (Japanese-to-English only)
- Interpreter for civil litigation, chiefly between US and Japanese entities, **but with face-to-face deposition interpreting in Japan drastically declining after the pandemic (and the Osaka deposition rooms closed), I am more occupied these days with business-related interpreting.**
- Owner of tiny company providing the above services

# My Intended Audience

- People who might be considering a career in either translation or interpreting (or both)

# Scope

- Commercial translation
- I am not referring to literary translation, which is a relatively tiny market, nor do I recommend anime or game translation, these fields being highly competitive and, therefore, low paid.
- Interpreting

# My Goals in Making this Presentation

- To provide an overview of the career opportunities in language services as seen from the inside.
- To provide you an opportunity to ask questions.

# Translation Careers

- Advantages/disadvantages
- Types of work
- Types of working environments
- Skills required
- Qualifications
- Income

# Advantages of a Career in Translation

- High income (although freelance translator earning potential has drastically dropped because the only clients most freelancers can access are using AI to replace them)
- Freedom to choose your working hours and take long vacations (for freelancers, at least)

# Disadvantages of a Career in Translation

- Overloading and lack of freedom to choose your working hours (for freelancers)
- Inability to take long vacations (this sounds like a contradiction to the above slide, but bear in mind that control of your work load is both important and difficult.

# Discipline and Planning

- A skillful translator can (could, at least at the time of this presentation) get so much work that free time disappears.
- The need for scheduling and discipline are on the other side of the “freedom coin.”

# Types of Translation Work Classified by Content

- Industrial/technical
- Financial
- Business correspondence and presentations
- Legal
- Chemical, biomedical, pharmaceutical
- Entertainment (anime, games, subtitling), but these are fiercely competitive and, as a result, low paid.

# Industrial/Technical Translation

- User manuals
- Maintenance manuals
- Patents
- Sales literature (while the above three areas are now largely taken over by AI translation followed by post-editing, sales literature, although a small-demand sector, is probably still promising.)

# Sales Literature

- Higher paid than instructional manual work, and requires somewhat different skills
- Small segment of the market in terms of volume

# Consumer Product Related

- Exports of industrial electronics from Japan are about the same as consumer electronics.
- Consumer products require *very little translation per export amount* compared with industrial products. *If that were not the case, people couldn't use those products easily.*
- Industrial products are much more complex and diverse, and therefore represent a much larger market than consumer product work.

# Patent Translation

- Over 1 million words of Japanese-English translation required each day.
- Requires a special set of skills.
- AI is quickly taking over from humans in translating patents.

# Types of Translation Work Classified by Client Positioning

- Reader-driven (the ultimate paying client is a reader)
- Writer-driven (the ultimate paying client is an author)

# Reader-Driven Translation

- Ordered by the potential reader
- Often discretionary
- Usually lower-paid than writer-driven work
- Often commissioned in the country of the reader
- Often only requires accuracy, not sparkling writing style

# Writer-Driven Translation

- Ordered by an author or someone acting on behalf of the author.
- Almost always non-discretionary (i.e., essential to achieving a specific goal, such as sales, patent application, governmental approvals).
- Higher-paid than reader-driven work.
- Often commissioned in the country of the writer.

# Working Environments

- In-house (at non-translation businesses; few translators work *as employees* for translation businesses).
- Freelance—working with agencies, almost always remote
- Freelance—working with direct clients, almost always remote, **but direct client interaction is important and sometimes essential.**

# In-House Translators

## Advantages:

- Close contact with authors (but that is limited to working at non-translation businesses)
- Ability to learn without great time pressures

## Disadvantages:

- Lower pay than freelancing outside but loss of freelancing work to AI users is narrowing the gap, and even making in-house work an attractive refuge for under-employed or unemployed freelancers.

# Salary Limitation Axiom

- It is nearly impossible for an in-house translator working at a desk in a company in Japan to make more than a department manager at that company.
- It can cause great consternation and even anger on the part of “normal” employees.

# The Reason for the Salary Ceiling

- When you sit at a desk with others, you are usually considered to be in the “labor market”
- You therefore will cause great distress if you make considerably more than people with whom you work.
- Salaries in companies in Japan are still only a fraction of what a freelance translator can make (or could make until AI began to destroy the demand for freelance translation by humans in around 2022)

# Freelance Translators Working Through Agencies I

## Advantages

- No need to sell
- The agency can get away with lying about the abilities of “their” translators (although few “have” any translators), whereas a single translator needing to meet a direct client will not be able to lie about abilities and knowledge.
- High tolerance for poor spoken Japanese (and agencies outside Japan won’t know the difference or care)
- Buffering from a client who might not give you work directly because of a perceived or real skill insufficiency.

# Freelance Translators Working Through Agencies II

## Disadvantages

- Low pay: Often less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  of what can be made working directly with clients
- Frequent need to take work outside your field of specialization, **this being more serious as the amount of *translation* work shrinks and freelancers cannot be as selective as before.**

# Freelance Working Directly With Clients

## Advantages

- Much higher pay
- Ability to choose work by selecting sales targets

## Disadvantages

- Need to sell
- If you are in Japan, spoken Japanese at a level sufficient for sales situations is nearly essential.

# Infrastructure Required

- Computer
- Internet connectivity
- ~~■ Fax (dropping in importance)~~

# Skills Required

- General source-language ability
- Source-language reading ability
- Target-language writing skills
- Field-specific knowledge
- Spoken Japanese ability if you are in Japan or otherwise need to interact with native Japanese speakers.

# Reading Ability

- You should be able to read *aloud* the text you are translating without faltering.
- While the above sounds harsh, if you cannot achieve that level, you will probably find it difficult to directly interact with Japanese clients, many of whom still have doubts about non-Japanese translating from Japanese.
- The process of translating Japanese-to-English is not one of surrounding yourself with dictionaries or constantly doing online research. The professional translator should strive to work themselves away from dictionary use.

# Target-Language Writing Skills

- Translators are writers.
- The globally accepted ideal is for the translator to translate into the translator's native language.
- This ideal has often not been achieved in Japan, but things got better, until AI, which has no native language, but writes better English than most native Japanese speakers.

# Field-Specific Knowledge

- Any text worth paying to translate is “about something.” “General translation” is essentially a myth, driven by wishful thinking.
- Field-specific knowledge is the key to high-quality translation.
- If you attempt to develop direct clients, **which has become an important temporary survival strategy**, field-specific knowledge is essential, because the client will find you out in a very short time if you don’t have it.
- Agencies are more forgiving in this area, because they shield you from scrutiny by the end users.

# Specialization

- Specialize now or rationalize later.
- If you don't enjoy the field you are translating in, you will be an unhappy camper, with the rewards you will perceive from translating being limited to cash in your bank account.
- These days, without specialization, even the cash in your bank account will be considerably less, even if you are capable of acquiring clients, which is not a given.

# Do You Need a Degree in the Specialty You Choose?

- Absolutely not, but.....
- Studying a non-translation, non-language specialty is the long path to the big(ger) pot of gold at the end of the translation rainbow, for the small number of translators who will survive.
- Today, a translator with only knowledge of language and translation is approaching being unusable.
- Need for diligence and motivation
- Willingness to give up what you want now to get what you want most, because studying, particularly studying of languages, will make you very little money.

# Spoken Japanese

- You need it to communicate with Japanese clients if you are to acquire direct Japanese clients, important if you are in Japan.
- Many Japanese clients will find it difficult to believe you can translate if your *spoken* Japanese is poor.
- Agencies (although low-paying) are more forgiving, **and ones outside of Japan are usually clueless or don't care.**

# Translator Education

- Virtually all available translator education in Japan falls under the category of for-profit schools aiming at native-Japanese students.
- These schools offer little for a native English writer.
- ~~■ One exception is a single course offered by Simul.~~
- Universities offering Japanese and translation programs have begun to eliminate those programs.

# ~~Simul Academy~~

- ~~■ Course taught by Fred Uleman ([fmugol.com](mailto:fmugol.com)) for native speakers of English.~~
- ~~■ Information available at <http://www.simul.co.jp/>~~

There don't appear to be any courses currently offered by Simul for native English speakers.

# Qualifications

- In Japan, formal qualifications are virtually meaningless in the real world of commercial translation.
- Mention of such qualifications as 漢検 or 日本語能力検定 marks a translator as a beginner.
- In the US, ATA accreditation could be meaningful, as agencies sometimes use the ATA directory to find translators. But agency use of AI is quickly bringing the model of freelancing for agencies to an end.

# Translator Monthly Income

- In-house: Probably less than 500,000 yen and that even that level is probably quite rare, because you are seen as being part of the labor market.
- Freelance (with direct clients): Limited only by the hours you work **and your sales ability**. Significant numbers of translators have made over 1,000,000 yen and some more than 2 or 3 times that amount, **but those days are quickly coming to an end for most**.

# Per-Volume Rates (Patent Translation)

- Patent attorneys pay between 20 and 35 yen/word, with the high end being paid by US patent attorneys. But translation orders from law firms appear to be drying up because of AI adoption.
- Agencies might pay 15 yen/word (but much lower these days) or as much as 30 yen/word (rare lately).
- Manufacturers (dealt with directly) often can pay as much as 30 yen/word, even lately, although those rates are also not going to go on for much longer because of adoption of AI by even non-translation businesses.

# Daily Output

- The needs of commercial translation users demand that a translator be able to output 2000 words/day.
- Many professional translators output much more.
- The average might be closer to 3000-4000 words/day; some translators claim to be regularly able to output 6000 words/day.

# JA-EN Translation Market

- Overwhelming majority of higher-paid JA-EN translation is ordered in Japan, and is mostly writer-driven translation.
- The next largest market is in the US (mostly reader-driven translation for civil litigation)
- The market for discovery document translation in the US migrated to China and India shortly after this presentation, and is apparently migrating to AI using in agencies or even in law firms.
- There could be about 8,000 to 10,000 translators serving all JA-EN demand, including in-house translators. The translator population is rapidly shrinking as people leave, seeing much less translation work ordered by the only client demographic (agencies) they can get work from.

# Who Are All These Translators?

- The majority of JA-EN translators are probably still native Japanese speakers. These days, the use of AI is changing the makeup of the population that translates.
- There might be 500 non-Japanese translators active in Japan. AI use has probably reduced this number significantly.
- The outlook for a qualified non-Japanese translator (unlike the outlook for non-Japanese interpreters) was bright, but the outlook is dimming for native speakers of both languages, thanks to AI.
- Translation ability combined with sales ability can bring high rewards.

# Is There Work In Your Home Country ?

- With the Internet, JA-EN translation work (at least at low rates) is probably available anywhere, but that will likely not include direct clients, **particularly Japanese clients.**
- Some translators working from a distance are **now** finding it more difficult, however, to maintain the desired income level.

# First Approaches: How Do You Start?

- In-house work, without discarding the approach of staying in-house, given the bleak outlook for freelancing. I recommend acquiring a non-language, non-translation career-building skill and seeking employment at a non-translation company.
- Translation at a distance (becoming more difficult, as agency work dries up)
- Reside in Japan (difficult because the Japanese government requires foreign residents to have a “real” job, and freelance translating is not a real job.

# Starting Out In-House

- Good for a starter, **and can provide some future-proofing**, but the income ceiling is low if you are only translating, for the reason mentioned.
- **Very** few agencies have such positions, since they cannot bear the associated fixed costs.
- **Non-translation businesses** should be the targets of choice, and offer opportunities to acquire field-specific knowledge.

# Distance Translation:

- The Internet ~~has brought~~ work to many translators; that is becoming less important, as direct interaction with translation consumers becomes more important.
- Low pay; situation made worse by “reverse auctions” in which prices are bid down.
- It is often difficult to resolve payment disputes at a distance.
- High-paying clients **not in the translation business themselves** do not generally use the Internet to find translators, **and this is particularly true of Japanese clients.**
- **Freelancers need other methods of acquiring such clients.**

# Reverse Auctions

- Web-based job markets where translators make offers to take translation jobs.
- Increasingly high participation from places with neither JA nor EN as native and no ability to judge quality or qualifications.
- Not likely to result in any continuing relationships with high-paying clients, which do not use such venues to find translators.

# Reside in Japan

- Some period of residence ~~as a translator~~ in Japan is a valuable experience.
- It is very difficult to achieve the level of spoken Japanese you would need to acquire Japanese client by just studying outside Japan.
- For Japanese-to-English work, the high-paying clients are here, not in English-speaking countries, and they rarely go off-shore for their translation needs, **but that has changed somewhat recently.**
- Some high-paying clients might be “portable” overseas, but almost all need to be acquired while you are in Japan.

# Machine Translation

## (before and after the AI hype storm)

- AI is the answer to the eternal dream of cutting out the expensive, time-consuming process of human translation.
- Heavy AI adoption by agencies is ending the business model of freelance translating for agencies.
- ~~■ MT for Japanese-to-English writer-driven translation has not arrived and probably will not arrive during the working lifetime of people sitting in this room, for several reasons that are not discussed by the sellers MT systems.~~  
AI-generated translation for even writer-driven materials for most large-demand domains is here now and is well on its way in replacing human translators, most of whom work for agencies that are switching to AI.

# Questions?

# Types of Interpreting Work

- In-house
- Conference interpreting
- Legal interpreting

# In-House Interpreting

- Opportunity to acquire field-specific knowledge, which makes interpreting easier
- Pay limitations are the same as with in-house translators; the pay must be kept low enough to prevent unrest among employees.

# Interpreting: Nature or Nurture?

- In Japan very few people do both interpreting and translating.
- Opportunities for non-ethnically Japanese interpreters are limited.
- *Nature* is still seen to be as important as *nurture* to some people here.

# Conference Interpreting

- An increasing number of non-Japanese are acquiring interpreting skills up to the task of conference interpreting.
- It is still extremely difficult to get work unless you are part of the stream of interpreting training run by several specific companies, which form what could be called a conference interpreting mafia.

# Legal Interpreting

- Depositions for US litigation, **although the Covid pandemic brought face-to-face depositions in Japan to almost a total stop, and now the Osaka deposition rooms have even been closed.**
- Clients are US attorneys not burdened with preconceived notions linking ethnicity with language or interpreting ability.
- Pay is high compared with other forms of interpreting work.

# Interpreting Rates

- 25,000 to 70,000 yen/day for non-deposition interpreting.
- Deposition interpreting pays much better (typical deposition rates **have been at least** 120,000 yen/day, for example.
- The stakes are high enough in deposition interpreting to lower the resistance to paying an interpreter very high fees.

# Which Activity is More Lucrative?

- A **very** prolific translator with direct clients can make considerably more than **some interpreters** working through agencies, and **perhaps** even more than an interpreter working with direct clients.
- The introduction of AI and its effect on translation rates has, however, made that a difficult feat.

# Japan Association of Translators

## 日本翻訳者協会

- Only active group of individual commercial translators in Japan
- Established in 1985; is now an NPO (特定非営利活動法人) with 500-plus members (40% outside Japan)
- ~~Irregular meetings in Tokyo and Osaka are open to all.~~  
Most meetings lately are online.
- ~~Substantial website: [www.jat.org](http://www.jat.org) for information on meetings~~ Things are apparently in flux.
- JAT seems uninterested in addressing the real-life issues facing translation professionals, preferring to dance around the issues and pursue activities that are, at best, peripheral or of little interest to translators who have worked in fields with large demand.

# International Japanese-English Translation Conferences

- Unique: focused on a language pair, with healthy international participation.
- Previous conferences held in places such as Hakone, Fuji-Yoshida, Urayasu, Yokohama (3 times), Tokyo, Kyoto, Vancouver, Brisbane, Sheffield, Austin, Monterey, San Francisco, Dublin, Cairns, and Fukuoka.
- Even though I have presented in at least eight IJET Conferences over the years, current trends in translation as a viable career make me wonder how long these conferences will maintain their relevance or attraction.

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# Questions?