Conference interpreting in Japan

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Introduction

The term “conference interpreting” [kaigi-tsuyaku] in Japan does not have a formal and set definition but examining those identified as kaigi-tsuyakusha [conference interpreters] reveals who they are and what they do. Kaigi-tsuyakusha for spoken languages generally refers to interpreters who are capable of handling simultaneous interpreting in addition to consecutive interpreting in formal professional settings. They are mostly freelancers who are contracted for individual assignments by interpreting agencies, working in a wide range of settings such as conferences, diplomatic engagements, business meetings, press events and media broadcasts.

History

Various databases of Japanese government records, academic and commercial publications and newspaper archives indicate that the use of the term kaigi-tsuyaku started in the late 1950s (e.g. Haruki 1957) amidst Japan’s effort to re-establish diplomatic and economic relationships with other nations following the end of the post-war Allied occupation in 1952. It was gradually popularized, especially with the rise of news interpreting on TV during the Gulf War in the early 1990s (e.g. Asahi Shimbun 1991; Mainichi Shimbun 1992). The first reference to doji-tsuyaku [simultaneous interpreting] in the Japanese press can be found in articles reporting the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo in November 1943 (e.g. Asahi Shimbun 1943; Yomiuri Hochi 1943). During this conference, which was organized by the military-led Japanese government, a total of six interpreters for Japanese, English and Chinese (two per language) in an adjacent room rendered simultaneous interpretation through cables, with the audience listening via earphones (Yomiuri Hochi 1943). This arrangement was “Japan’s first scientific trial” (Yomiuri Hochi 1943: 3) to shorten the conference time and facilitate smooth and effective communication. As the interpreters were referred to as interpreting-announcers from NHK (Japan’s national broadcasting organization), they were presumably delivering simultaneous renditions of prepared translations of speeches by the delegates. Any spontaneous remarks were interpreted consecutively with interpreters situated in the meeting room (Tanioka 1943).
Referring to a passage in the *Handbook for Guides and Interpreters* (Ohtani, Igarashi & Fujimoto 1947), Mizuno (2017) points out that Toshiharu Ohtani, a professor of English, carried out simultaneous interpreting by using microphones and earphones connected via cables in a meeting of the American Education Mission in March 1946. Although this was an ad-hoc interpreting arrangement and Ohtani himself did not use the term *doji-tsuyaku*, he predicted that this type of interpreting arrangement would surely be used for future international conferences (Ohtani, Igarashi & Fujimoto 1947). During the Tokyo War Crimes Trial (1946–1948), simultaneous interpreting equipment, identical to that used at the Nuremberg Trials, and an interpreter booth were used, but the mode of interpreting was predominantly consecutive (Takeda 2010).

Pioneers in the professionalization of conference interpreting, such as Masumi Muramatsu and Tetsuya Komatsu, began their careers mostly as interpreters for Japanese businesspersons’ group visits to the United States and for international conferences against atomic bombs held in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the 1950s and 1960s (Komatsu 2017; Torikai 2009). The demand for conference interpreting increased sharply during another wave of high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, driven by major international events such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka Expo. Simultaneous interpreting led by Sen Nishiyama in the live broadcast of the Apollo Moon landing in 1969 was a monumental event in the history of interpreting in Japan and attracted great attention from the general public (Torikai 2009). In the mid-1960s, the first interpreting agencies in Japan, namely ISS, Simul International, Inter Group and Japan Convention Services (JCS), emerged, all of which functioned as professional congress organizers at the same time (Sato 2004). Eventually, all but JCS started their own interpreter training programmes as a response to the growing need for conference interpreters (Honda 2016; Sato 2004).

With the advance of satellite broadcasting and major international events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War, simultaneous interpreting of live television news rose as a prominent form of interpreting from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The 1990s also saw an increase in the demand for conference interpreting in business settings with the rise of foreign ownership of Japanese stocks and large-scale mergers and acquisitions targeting Japanese companies (Fujii 2019). The need for business interpreters, especially in the area of investor relations, began to grow during this period (Fujii 2019). Business-related assignments continue to dominate the practice of conference interpreters in Japan.

**Country-specific features**

Japan does not have a designated official language (Legislative Bureau of the House of Councillors 2020). According to *Ethnologue* (2020), Japanese is the majority language in Japan, being spoken by more than 98 per cent of the population as their first language. Korean is spoken by close to one million residents followed by Chinese with approximately 700,000. In addition, the numbers of both foreign residents and visitors were increasing year by year before the COVID-19 pandemic (JNTO 2021; Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020), leading to the diversification of languages spoken in Japan. English is commonly used in business settings, but, because of the relatively low English proficiency in Japan (ranked 55th by EF English Proficiency Index, EF 2020), Japanese businesspeople still rely heavily on conference interpreters.

A career guidebook for interpreters and translators published annually lists 54 Japanese agencies that offer interpreting services (Ikaros Mook 2021). Core language pairs offered by major interpreting agencies are Japanese paired with English, Chinese, Korean, French,
German, Spanish and Russian, according to the relevant company websites. Inter Group, for example, lists as many as 42 language pairs, but Japanese-English is by far the most in demand, according to Yukiko Fujii, former president of Simul International. Based on her 30 years of experience in interpreter management at the company, Fujii estimates that the number of active conference interpreters in Japan for the Japanese-English language pair (all levels combined) is approximately 500, while the number drops significantly for other language pairs, with Japanese-Chinese coming in second with approximately 100, followed by Japanese-Korean with 50 (Fujii, pers. comm., 14 January 2020).

The mode of interpreting used in conference settings can be divided into three types (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume): simultaneous, consecutive and whispered (with or without the use of portable devices), with simultaneous being the highest in demand (Fujii 2019). Before the COVID-19 outbreak, remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) was not yet prevalent, but it rapidly spread during the pandemic (Matsushita 2021). One of the first attempts to introduce RSI to Japan was seen in 2019, when Simul International signed an exclusive sales agreement with Interprefy, a Swiss-based company offering a global RSI platform. Eventually, other companies also started offering RSI services when the demand for onsite interpreting services plummeted due to the pandemic. Not only RSI but also over-the-phone interpreting (OPI) and video remote interpreting (VRI), which had primarily been conducted by specialized companies in the field of community interpreting (e.g. emergency services), began to be widely used in conference interpreting (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume).

**Professional associations**

Among the hundreds of conference interpreters based in Japan, only 10 are members of AIIC (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume) as of March 2021 (AIIC 2021). In addition to its strict admissions policy, which requires the applicant to be sponsored by at least three current AIIC members, including two from the same region, Honda (2016) attributes the low AIIC membership in Japan to the lack of incentive to join. With AIIC’s headquarters being located in Switzerland and many of its activities taking place outside of Asia, interpreters in Japan do not have regular contact with AIIC and have fewer opportunities to take advantage of member benefits. Moreover, “many conference interpreters do not need to seek work outside of an agency” (Honda 2016: 50) or “look outside of Japan for networking or jobs” (Honda 2016: 62), although this situation may change as a result of the pandemic. Despite the low dependency of Japanese interpreters on professional associations, smaller associations for specific language pairs such as the Roshiago Tsuyaku Kyokai (Association of Russian Interpreters) have existed since the early 1980s. However, it was not until 2015 that the first professional association for all language pairs, the Japan Association of Conference Interpreters (JACI), was established.

According to JACI, the organization has more than 600 members as of March 2021. In terms of language pairs, Japanese-English ranks first, represented by 468 members, followed by Japanese paired with Chinese (16), Spanish (16), Korean (8), French (7) and German (7). JACI calls itself the first organization in Japan to be “operated by conference interpreters for the benefit of conference interpreters” (JACI 2021). Similar to AIIC, its activities include “exchange of professional and industry information among members, collection and dissemination of interpreting-related information, events, outreach and other social initiatives, and creation of text and video contents, in order to educate interpreters and raise their social status” (JACI 2021).
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There is another professional association, the Japan Translation Federation (JTF), which was established in 1981. Its activities have focused mainly on the development of the translation industry and networking among its members. However, the organization has become more actively involved in the field of conference interpreting, especially after sending its own members as delegates to ISO’s committee-level discussions concerning the establishment of interpreting-related guidelines and requirements, first for community interpreting and later for conference interpreting. This led to the establishment of a unit within JTF specifically for interpreting. The Japan Association of Translators (JAT), founded in 1985, also aims to “improve the status and understanding of the translation and interpreting professions” and has members who are conference interpreters.

Market development

The market size for conference interpreting in Japan is not well documented, partly due to the difficulty of obtaining the information needed to make an accurate calculation. Most of the Japanese interpreting agencies are unlisted companies with no requirements to submit their financial statements on a quarterly or semi-annual basis, and no official statistics exist for this particular industry. Sato (2004) was one of the first academic attempts to provide an economic overview of the industry. Based on statistical figures on international conferences published by the Japan Congress Convention Bureau (JCCB), she conducted interviews with industry stakeholders (e.g. interpreters, interpreting agencies and clients) and estimated that the market size of the Japanese conference interpreting industry was between 7.667 and 11.5 billion yen (Sato 2004: 28).

According to a survey conducted by Yano Research Institute (2019), a Japanese think-tank, the market size of the “translation and interpreting business” as a whole in 2018 was estimated at 300 billion yen. JTF also conducted a survey in 2017. Based on responses from 278 of the 1,137 translation and/or interpreting service providers targeted, it estimated the market size of the translation industry (excluding the interpreting industry) in Japan to be 256.1 billion yen (JTF 2018). Based on these figures, the market size of the interpreting industry in Japan can be approximated as somewhere between 10 and 50 billion yen.

One of the idiosyncrasies of the conference interpreting industry in Japan is its interpreting fee system. Based on the information provided on each agency’s website, most of them have only two types of fees: half-day (typically less than four hours) and full day (up to eight hours). They also charge hourly fees for overtime. In the case of Simul International, interpreters are grouped into four categories (S, A, B and G) based on their years of experience and skill level as evaluated by internally administered exams. A half-day fee for Class G, the lowest rank, is 34,000 yen (including agency commission), but the number jumps to 88,000 yen for the highest rank (Class S). For a full day, the company charges 50,000 yen for Class G and 130,000 yen for Class S. Other major agencies, such as JCS, Inter Group and ISS, have similar interpreting fee systems although the categorization of interpreters and the actual amount they charge for each rank are slightly different. According to the previously mentioned career guide-book, interpreters earn between 17,812 yen and 92,500 yen for a full day, based on responses from 32 interpreting service providers surveyed in December 2020 (Ikaros Mook 2021: 64).

Training opportunities

Unlike other countries, interpreter training in Japan has historically been provided by agency-owned interpreting schools and private language schools (Honda 2016; Sato 2004; Takeda
Japanese interpreting agencies emerged during the high economic growth period of the 1960s. To meet the urgent need for trained interpreters, most of these agencies established their own interpreting schools, focusing solely on practical training. Before the pandemic, these schools offered up to two training sessions a week, typically for two hours. There is no limit to the number of years students may train to pass the graduation exam. Although no official certificate can be obtained, graduating from these schools is regarded as proof of interpreting ability and is sometimes required when applying for in-house interpreter positions. As Honda argues, it was believed that the interpreting schools became popular among aspiring interpreters because they seemed to “offer training that was more conducive to market trends” and “served as the gateway for receiving interpreting work” for those seeking efficient ways of entering the interpreting market (Honda 2016: 54).

Although the first interpreter training course at the university level was offered by International Christian University in the 1960s under the leadership of Mitsuko Saito, interpreting and translation as an academic discipline remained relatively unrecognized in Japan for several decades (Torikai 2009). It was not until 1995 that graduate-level interpreter training programmes emerged in Japan with Masaomi Kondo’s conference interpreting programme at Daito Bunka University’s Graduate School of Economics (Takeda 2012). Other graduate schools, including those of Kobe College and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, followed, and as of 2021 there are more than ten universities offering interpreter training at the graduate level, including those specializing in community interpreting (Ikaros Mook 2021). At Rikkyo University’s Graduate School of Intercultural Communication, the conference interpreter training programme is designed to achieve standardized professional competencies as defined by the ISO (Rikkyo 2021). Despite these advances, interpreter training at both graduate and undergraduate levels is still underdeveloped in Japan even compared to other countries in the region such as China and South Korea (Takeda 2012).

Research on conference interpreting

With the emergence of conference interpreting as a profession, practice-oriented books authored by interpreters started appearing in the 1960s. Drawing on their career paths and experiences, these mostly self-trained conference interpreters gave advice on how interpreters should behave and hone their skills (e.g. Fukui & Asano 1961; Kunihiro, Nishiyama & Kanayama 1969). In academia, language teachers were among the first to pay attention to the practice of conference interpreters, which is evidenced by a special issue on simultaneous interpreting in the English Teachers’ Magazine (Taishukan 1968) in 1968. It was in the mid-1980s that conference interpreters with teaching positions at universities started publishing articles in academic journals on various aspects of simultaneous interpreting and interpreting exercises incorporated in language teaching (e.g. Funayama 1985; Hagiwara 1983). In 1990, a group of conference interpreters and others interested in conference interpreting launched an informal forum, calling it the Interpreting Research Association of Japan (IRAJ). With attention to the development of interpreting studies in Europe, IRAJ published 17 issues of its journal, Interpreting Research, over the course of ten years, mostly concerning the underlying mechanisms of simultaneous interpreting and interpreter training. An overview of the IRAJ’s activities is presented by Kondo and Mizuno (1995) in a special issue of Target. In 2000, the IRAJ was reorganized as the Japan Association for Interpretation Studies (JAIS), a full-fledged academic association. The name was changed to the Japan Association for Interpreting and Translation Studies (JAITS) in 2008.
The topics covered by research papers on conference interpreting in the JAIS/JAITS journals have centred around cognitive processing, product assessment, strategies, interpreting in language teaching, interpreter training and history. A range of research methods has been employed, including text analysis of recorded interpreting, interviews, surveys, simulation and experiments. Major monographs related to conference interpreting include Torikai (2009) on the oral history of pioneer conference interpreters in Japan, Mizuno (2015) on cognitive constraints and strategies in simultaneous interpreting and Funayama (2020) on mental processes in simultaneous interpreting. There is also an edited volume on note-taking for consecutive interpreting and interpreter training (Someya 2017). A large-scale Japanese-English parallel corpus of simultaneous interpreting in press conferences (JNPC Corpus) was released in 2020 (Matsushita, Yamada & Ishizuka 2020) and is expected to lead to a variety of new research. Given that interpreting classes at universities are taught mostly as part of undergraduate language education, TILT (translation in language teaching) is likely to remain an area of research on conference interpreting in Japan.

**Sign language interpreting in academic and conference settings**

Conference sign language interpreting was not widely recognized as a field of sign language interpreting in Japan until the 2010s. In 1970, urged by the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, the Japanese government started promoting sign language classes in local communities with the aim of producing volunteer supporters for the Deaf (Shuwa-hoshi-in yosei jigyo). Since then, the training and practice of sign language interpreters have taken place predominantly in the context of social welfare. With an increasing number of the Deaf advancing to higher education and professional careers, however, a need has arisen for sign language interpreters who can work in high-level academic and professional settings. There are now Deaf professionals in a range of fields, including science, engineering, architecture and economics (see also Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume), who require highly skilled sign language interpreters when attending meetings and conferences (Kimura & Miyazawa 2022). There is also a growing need for sign language interpreters in international conferences where English is the working language (Kimura & Oka 2019). Further, since the onset of the pandemic, conference sign language interpreters have been primarily working in remote settings, which poses challenges for interpreters to adapt to new technologies and work environments.

Although there are 3,832 nationally certified sign language interpreters in Japan as of 31 March 2021 (ICCD 2021), only a handful are capable of handling high-level academic and conference interpreting. Most of these conference sign language interpreters are graduates of the Sign Language Interpreter Training Programme at the College of the National Rehabilitation Center for Persons with Disabilities, located in the outskirts of Tokyo (Kimura & Miyazawa 2022). Those who can interpret directly from English into Japanese Sign Language and vice versa are even fewer. Machiko Takagi, originally a Japanese-English conference interpreter, became the first person to interpret English into Japanese Sign Language for Deaf delegates at a United Nations meeting in 2000 (Kimura & Oka 2019: 162–171). Since then, a few more interpreters have followed in her footsteps. These English-Japanese Sign Language interpreters worked at the Critical Link 9 Conference (on community interpreting) in Tokyo in 2019 as well.

Recognizing the significant need for conference sign language interpreters, some organizations started training sign language interpreters for academic, professional and conference settings. Since most of the conference sign language interpreters are currently based in the Tokyo area, the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka launched a project to
train conference sign language interpreters in 2016 to address the need in western regions of Japan. Also, Gunma University, which had been offering sign language classes, started a new programme to train sign language interpreters for academic settings in 2017.

As these efforts are still in their initial stages, the shortage of conference sign language interpreters in Japan persists.

**Looking ahead**

Despite the global spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF), the English proficiency level in Japan is still relatively low as previously mentioned, and there is no indication in the current market that the need for English-Japanese conference interpreting will lessen any time soon. As for the impact of ELF on conference interpreters for languages other than English (i.e. the increasing use of English by non-native speakers of English in conferences, see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume), no concrete evidence for declining demand in the market has been presented in statistics or academic investigation at this time.

With the rapid development of machine translation and technologies to enable RSI and the global shift towards online meetings, their impact on the practice of conference interpreting is attracting attention from both professional and academic communities (e.g. JACI 2019; Okumura 2013). In addition, an increased amount of research is being conducted to apply machine translation technologies to interpreting (Nakamura, Sudoh & Sakti 2019). It is expected that interpreter trainers will be required to address these new technologies in Japanese classrooms in the not-so-distant future.

**Further reading**


**References**


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