

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

Why Take Notes?

~~www.lise.jp/honyaku/~~



Content for colleague translators is
now located at a new business
website, at

<https://kirameki-translation.co.jp/4xlators.html>

Your Speaker: The Past

- Reconnaissance plane crewmember (specialty: Russian)
- Good fortune sometimes plays a major part in career directions
- Former electrical engineer
- 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 two 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 considering a career in either translation or interpreting (or both)

Scope

- Commercial translation
- Interpreting
- Does not include entertainment translation, which is very attractive to many people but, because of competition, troublesome as a way to make a living.

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 earning potential is seriously dropping because of AI use by agencies)
- 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

Discipline and Planning

- A skillful translator can 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
- Entertainment (anime, games, subtitling)
- This list is certainly not exhaustive.

Industrial/Technical Translation

- User manuals
- Maintenance manuals
- Sales literature (for non-consumer products)
- Patents

Sales Literature

- Higher paid than user manual work, and requires 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, consumers 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.

Types of Translation Work Classified by Client Positioning

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

Reader-Driven Translation

- Ordered by the potential reader
- Discretionary
- Low-paid
- 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.
- **Non-discretionary** (i.e., essential to achieving a specific goal, such as sales, patent application).
- Higher paid than reader-driven work.
- Often commissioned in the country of the writer.

Working Environments

- In-house (very few positions in translation agencies)
- Freelance—working with agencies, almost always remote
- Freelance—working with direct clients, almost always remote

In-House Translators

Advantages:

- Close contact with authors
- Ability to learn without great time pressure

Disadvantages:

- Lower pay than freelancing outside but loss of freelancing work to AI-using agencies is narrowing the gap.

Salary Limitation Axiom

- It is nearly impossible for an in-house translator working at a desk in a company in Japan to make any more than a department manager at that company.

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 can 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 disturbed the market for freelance translation)

Freelance Translators Working Through Agencies

Advantages

- No need to sell
- The agency can get away with lying about the abilities of “their” translators (although few “have” many translators), whereas a single translator needing to meet a direct client will not be able to lie about abilities.
- High tolerance for poor spoken Japanese (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

Disadvantages

- Low pay: approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ 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 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

Infrastructure Required

- Computer

- Internet connectivity

- ~~■ Fax (dropping in importance)~~

We're finally over the fax thing.

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**

Reading Ability

- You should be able to read *aloud* the text you are translating without faltering. This sounds harsh, but if you cannot do this, you probably don't have what it takes to survive in a market where direct clients, not agencies, are not the targets.
- 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 is often ignored in Japan, for a number of cultural and demographic reasons.

Field-Specific Knowledge

- Any text worth paying to translate is “about something.”
- Field-specific knowledge is the key to high-quality translation **and higher earnings**.
- If you attempt to develop direct clients, 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, and many don't have the field-specific knowledge required to judge if a translator has such knowledge.

Specialization

- Specialize now or rationalize your generalist position later.
- If you don't enjoy the field you are translating in, the rewards you will perceive from translating will be limited to cash in your bank account.
- These days, without specialization, even the cash in your bank account will be considerably less.

Do You Need a Degree in the Specialty You Choose?

- No, 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.
- 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 alone, will make you very little money.

Spoken Japanese

- You need it to communicate with your Japanese clients if you are to acquire direct Japanese clients.
- Japanese clients generally will not believe you can translate if your *spoken* Japanese is poor.
- Agencies (although low-paying) are more forgiving, **and ones in 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.~~

~~Simul Academy~~

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

There don't appear to be any translation 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. **That said, agency use of AI is bringing the agency translation work model to an end.**

Translator Monthly Income

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

Per-Volume Rates (Patent Translation)

- Patent attorneys pay between 15 and 35 yen/word, **with the high end being paid by US patent attorneys.**
- Agencies pay as little as 15 yen/word (**but much lower these days**) or as much as 30 yen/word (**rare lately**), but their migration to AI is causing rates to drop quickly.
- Manufacturers (dealt with directly) often can pay as much as 30 yen/word, **even lately.**

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 (largely reader-driven translation for civil litigation)
- There could be about 8,000 to 10,000 translators serving all JA-EN demand, including in-house translators. The appearance of AI is probably causing this to shrink.

Who Are All These Translators?

- The majority of JA-EN translators are probably still native Japanese speakers.
- There might be 500 non-Japanese translators active in Japan.
- 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.
- 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
- Translation at a distance
- Reside in Japan

Starting Out In-House

- Good for a starter, but the income ceiling is low, for the reason mentioned.
- **Very** few agencies have such positions, since they cannot bear the associated fixed expense of paying a translator who might not be translating.
- **Non-translation businesses** should be the targets of choice, and offer opportunities to acquire field-specific knowledge.

Distance Translation:

- The Internet brings work to many translators.
- Low pay; situation made worse by “reverse auctions” in which prices are bid down.
- Often difficult to resolve payment disputes.
- High-paying clients do not generally use the Internet to find translators.
- High-paying Japanese direct clients seldom use the Internet to find translators. Freelancers need other methods of acquiring such clients.
- Places like LinkedIn are not very useful for that.

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.
- 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 clients by just study outside Japan.
- For Japanese-to-English work, the high-paying clients are here, not in English-speaking countries, and they seldom go off-shore for their translation needs, **but that has changed somewhat recently.**
- Some high-paying clients might be “portable” overseas, but usually need to be acquired while you are in Japan.

Machine Translation

(before and after the AI hype storm)

- The answer to the eternal dream—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, although many agencies offer low-paid, mind-numbing MT post-editing
- ~~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 is here and is starting to replace 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 extremely limited.
- *Nature* (Japanese DNA) is still seen by some Japanese people to be as important as *nurture*.

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 two Osaka deposition rooms have even been closed.**
- Clients are US attorneys not burdened with preconceived notions linking ethnicity with language ability.
- Pay is high compared with other forms of interpreting work.

Interpreting Rates

- 25,000 to 70,000 yen/day
- Deposition interpreting pays much better (typical deposition rates have been around 120,000 yen/day, for example.
- Pay limited for the same reason that limits in-house salaries, but the stakes are high enough in deposition interpreting to lower the resistance to paying an interpreter very high fees.

~~More Information~~ ~~About Deposition Interpreting~~

~~www.lise.jp/honyaku/depointro.html~~

Which Activity is More Lucrative?

- Some **very** prolific translators with direct clients can make more than **some interpreters** working through agencies, and **perhaps** even more than an interpreter working with direct clients. It depends.

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 (perhaps 40% outside Japan)
- ~~Irregular meetings in Tokyo and Osaka are open to all.~~ Most meetings lately are online.
- ~~Substantial website: www.jat.org for information on meetings~~ Things are apparently in flux.

International Japanese-English Translation Conferences

- Unique: focused on a language pair, with healthy international participation.
- Previous conferences held in Hakone, Fuji-Yoshida, Urayasu, Yokohama (3 times), Tokyo, Kyoto, Vancouver, Brisbane, Sheffield, Austin, Monterey, and San Francisco, & Dublin.
- I have presented at numerous IJET Conferences (presentations accessible at

<https://kirameki-translation.co.jp/4xlators.html#pres>

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Questions?