In the late 1980's some felt that it was imperative for Japanese interpreters to participate in a new area of research - interpretation studies - because the profession by its very nature is global. I also felt it to be our humble duty to make a contribution to bringing Japanese language and culture to the notice of the rest of the world, thus making interpreting studies more comprehensive.1

Basically I have two things to tell you. One is that there was a predecessor to JAIS, namely the Interpreting Research Association of Japan (IRAJ). The second is an explanation of why there was little research on interpreting in Japan prior to these bodies, which in turn calls for an explanation of why it is that the interpreting profession suffers from low esteem in Japan. Japanese culture looks askance at the variety and importance of spoken languages in other societies, perceiving itself as ethnically and linguistically homogenous. Strong antipathy among Japanese intellectuals against speaking English is also brought into the picture. But first a look back.

1. My awakening in 1989

The Interpreter Research Association of Japan (IRAJ) was launched in December 1990 as an informal gathering of those who were interested in studying, in academic and scientific ways, the phenomenon of interpreting in its multiple facets. I was one of two interpreters who called for this organisation to be created, and I will explain what prompted me to do so.

The 20th Anniversary Symposium at MIIS Gave Me Two Shocks

It was a year earlier in December 1989 that the Twentieth Anniversary Symposium of the Division of Translation and Interpretation, Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS), California, was held. I attended at the invitation of Dean Wilhelm Weber, who said, "Kondo, why don't you come to this symposium just for the heck of it?" I went with a short presentation called An Experience in Conducting Intensive Refresher Courses for Junior Colleagues. Two discoveries came as a shock to me at this Symposium:

- That there existed a solid body of interpreting studies literature as an emerging new academic discipline in Europe.
- That a number of post-graduate interpreter training programs existed in various parts of the Asia-Pacific region, with most listing Japanese as one of the languages to be interpreted to and from.

I also remember very distinctly that there was a speaker on sign language interpreting. This was my
first exposure to SLI, which I now take to be one of the two forms of interpreting, the other naturally being spoken-language interpreting.

2. A Dearth of Interpreting Studies in Japan: Why?

Back in Japan, however, there were few solid studies on interpreting. One exception was a heavy volume by the late Dr. Mitsuko Saito, a compilation of studies with official funding. The late Dr. ASANO Tasuku and the late Mr. NISHIYAMA Sen had written useful introductions to interpreting. I myself had written on certain specific aspects of Japanese-English interpreting difficulties and cross-cultural communicative issues, as well as on societal perception of the profession in Japan. 

However, most writing in those days merely described the careers of individual interpreters in anecdotal fashion, with hardly any in-depth analysis of the interpreting process or specific aspects of the profession.

The General Perception of Japan as Homogeneous in Ethnic Composition and Language

In many ways this was only natural because of the rather low esteem in which interpreting per se and the interpreting profession were held in this country. People thought interpreting could be done by anybody who could chatter in English. There was a general intellectual antipathy to anybody who could SPEAK English (as opposed to reading it or mastering other western languages like French and German), as well as a cultural bias against the speaking aspect of people's linguistic life in Japan.

For a long time, a general perception of Japan as a homogenous country with one race and one language had been dominant. During the 1980s the Japanese economy was doing very well, growing rapidly and even winning the trade war with America. Then Prime Minster Nakasone attributed Japan's economic success to linguistic and racial homogeneity, implying that a multilingual and multicultural situation would be detrimental and constitute an economic cost, rather than helping to enrich the economy and the culture of Japan.

The Prime Minister was factually wrong. There were some 700,000 ethnic Koreans living in Japan, there had been Ainu people with their own language and culture, there were an estimated 60,000 deaf people with their deaf culture and sign language, and there were ever more immigrant workers contributing to the economy, by doing menial work at low wages. The Prime Minister himself was soundly criticized in America, but many people in Japan probably agreed with him and dismissed these diverse groups simply as minorities. Though countries like Australia feel that cultural diversity is an asset to the economy and society in general, the general view in Japan is the diametrical opposite.

When people, even mistakenly, see themselves as the same people speaking the same language, they come to feel that since they share so much, they can take a great deal for granted. Face to face, they should be able to understand each other without explaining at length and expending too many words, without a sea of specifics. When one word is spoken, the rest should be automatically apparent. If you need a plethora of explanations to understand a point or use many words to make a point, you are regarded as a little slow. And at any rate, it was bad form to cause a commotion by speaking up and raising issues. Nobel Laureate KAWABATA Yasunari once said that oratory never produced important leaders in Japanese history. The garrulous are positively detested and persons of few words are liked. You should sit quietly and sip green tea, while a minimal message is communicated. "Belly Talk" is the preferred mode of communication.

This societal attitude toward speaking has continued to this day. Prime Minister Fukuda recently used the expression "breathing ahum or uh-hun" after meeting the opposition leader, Mr. Ozawa, to
discuss a possible grand coalition after losing a majority in the Upper House in the elections held a few weeks previously. One of the neologisms among young people in Japan today, I learned only recently, is KY, the acronym of the Japanese phrase "kuki ga yomenai", literally meaning, "being unable to read the air." If you are KY and unable to perceive the prevailing air in the group, you may be ostracized and even bullied.

High-Context versus Low-Context Cultures and Languages

Cultural anthropologist Edward Hall spoke of high-context and low-context cultures. In the former, the context of the communication goes a long way in explaining the meaning of utterances, so much can be assumed and therefore dispensed with in communication. A low-context culture demands the opposite approach: since few share the same experiences, details have to be spelled out.

One can safely maintain that Japanese is a typically high-context language, while English is a low-context one. In Japanese it is natural for the subject of a sentence to be omitted when the speaker thinks it is apparent. And no distinction is made between plural and singular nouns. Somewhat to my surprise, I have recently learned that Japanese sign language is low-context in comparison to spoken Japanese; many more specificities are required in Japanese sign language.

Speaking English - a sign of intellectual mediocrity

If speaking profusely in Japanese is wrong, then speaking English is even worse. I think we can say that there is a general intellectual antipathy in Japan toward SPEAKING ENGLISH. If you speak this language, you are a mediocre intellectual. I am not really sure how this attitude toward Japanese who SPEAK ENGLISH developed. Many Francophiles, and Germanists are highly respected, but I have had acquaintances tell me to my face that I must be stupid and a fool since I speak English. TSURUMI Shunsuke, an acknowledged intellectual leader in post-World War II Japan, once wrote that he intuitively had statistical proof showing English-speaking Japanese to be untrustworthy.6

There could have been socio-economic circumstances of some relevance here after Japan was defeated by America and China in the Asia-Pacific War in 1945. Following the end of the war, Americans came as victors to occupy a war-devastated and poverty-stricken Japan. Naturally the numerous Japanese who wanted to curry favor with the all-powerful Americans were not looked upon very kindly by the more morally upright population, who were perhaps simply devoid of English skills; English had been banned as an enemy language during the War years.

Some of my interpreting colleagues who also teach at universities hide the fact that they also interpret. Some quit interpreting as soon as they get a full-time teaching job. Some of the known intellectual giants in Japanese history like AMENOMORI Shuho (1668-1755) and FUKUZAWA Yukichi (1835-1901) spoke fluent Chinese + Korean and English respectively, and did serve as interpreters, but many biographies we read about them today omit this aspect of their lives. Their biographers screen the evidence, as is their right, but thereby betray their hidden antagonism to interpreting activities.

Interpreters Must Do What Japanese Culture Forbids Us to Do, Making Us Pariahs

How do spoken-language interpreters fare in such a society? In order to perform our service to society, there is no way we can avoid oral communication.

In a fundamental sense we are pariahs in Japan, doing what Japanese culture forbids in order to be of service to society. Mahatma Gandhi called the Indian untouchables Children of God. We don't have to be special children of God, but we do want full citizenship for our profession. Is it any wonder then that our profession does not command high respect and few want to research the processes involved in interpreting?
Art. 2 of the JAIS Statute states the objectives of our Association, one of which is "to contribute to the advancement of societal understanding of interpretation both as a profession and as a discipline". This is neither idle talk nor platitude; it is a major and urgent priority of the agenda of JAIS.

3. IRAJ Launched with Little Optimism

When I, together with Mr. Miura, proposed to launch interpreting studies in Japan, I was not at all optimistic about our prospects. But I did feel very strongly that organised efforts had to be made on this front. I felt it was imperative for Japanese interpreters to become part and parcel of an on-going new area of research in the world because the profession by its very nature is global. I also felt it to be our humble duty to make a due contribution to bringing the Japanese language and Japanese culture to the notice of the rest of the world, thus making interpreting studies more comprehensive. Personally, it was a small way to repay the immense debt that I felt I owed to the profession.

IRAJ was duly established in 1990 with twelve founding members, with only one persistent voice contrary to it. In the ensuing ten years, we met once a month to report on an area of European studies, as well as on curriculum and training methods used in various interpreting schools in Europe and elsewhere. We also exchanged information on what we were doing in training and research. We decided to publish a journal (Interpreting Research), first just to record the proceedings, but eventually to publish new studies by our members. Membership grew through word of mouth to about eighty over the ten-year period. We came out with seventeen issues of the journal altogether. Initially the ESS School of Interpreting at Yokohama volunteered to serve as our secretariat, and Mr. Mizuno Akira soon took over the role. He has been in charge of a very effective secretariat ever since, and remains to this day at JAIS.

I was happily wrong in my reading of the prevailing air blowing in Japan. It's not always bad to be a KY after all, is it? Pariahs or not, the interpreting profession was growing and expanding into broadcast interpreting with more Japanese TV programs broadcast in two languages, into business and in-house interpreting, into community interpreting at courts, police stations, immigration offices and hospitals. There was greater interest in applying interpreting training methods to foreign language teaching, and the profession became very popular among college students, especially female students, with more colleges and universities crying out for instructors competent and willing to come and teach. English language teaching had emphasized communicative English for a long time already anyway, although it had certain rather detrimental effects, it seems to me, on the students' English skills. The Ministry of Education came to encourage interpreter training in the meantime.

As a member of the Faculty of Economics, I was able to start the first post-graduate conference interpreting training program at the Graduate School of Economics of Daito Bunka University. There are now some twenty such courses in Japan. Indeed I personally feel that resources are spread thin with the establishment of so many similar courses.

4. JAIS Launched and Growing

As our tenth anniversary approached, some members of IRAJ initiated efforts to re-organise and upgrade our group into a more formal academic association. Intensive preparations went on for a year. We had to start from scratch, creating an outline of the organisation, enumerating specified activities, consolidating these thoughts in a written Statute, and manning the organisation. We were feeling our way in the dark, with many members - including myself - being utter novices as to how such an association should be run. Input by those with more experience, like Prof. Torikai and Prof. Funayama, was of immense value.
The founding Congress took place in Tokyo on September 23, 2000, exactly ten years after the inception of IRAJ. The Constitution was adopted with a small amendment, officers were approved, and the new Japan Association for Interpretation Studies (JAIS) came into being. Mr. Nishiyama gave the special commemorative lecture. A panel discussion followed on the current state of affairs of interpreting studies and the challenges facing it. Then we celebrated the birth of a new academic association devoted to the promotion of interpreting studies.

The Science Council of Japan almost immediately recognised JAIS. It seems to me that by bestowing an official seal of approval so quickly, it signaled that it had taken note of the very real achievements of IRAJ during the previous ten years.

In the special first issue of our new journal, Interpretation Studies, so competently compiled by the Editor in Chief, Prof. Dr. Someya, I concluded my remarks by saying:

"I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those who worked for IRAJ and for the birth of JAIS. At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I pay my deepest tribute to them all. I feel overwhelmed to see this special issue of our new journal appear. Thank you, everyone." 8

The strides JAIS has been making ever since its inception are amply demonstrated by what you are about to hear from my comrades. Our membership now exceeds 320, and submissions of papers to the annual Congress far exceed the number of slots available, requiring strict selection. The journal is also growing thicker and thicker despite equally exigent referees dutifully carrying out their difficult job. Special groups formed around common areas of interest now abound, and their activities are thriving and multiplying. A number of large-scale research projects are in progress, making me confident of forthcoming substantive results.

5. A Personal Note

If I may be allowed to conclude this brief presentation with a personal note, I wish to say that five years ago I was struck ill with a massive brain hemorrhage. Prof. Torikai ably took over the leadership of JAIS while I was lying unconscious in the Intensive Care Unit. I feel truly gratified to have been part of the spectacular development of interpreting studies in Japan. Our new organisation is progressing in accordance with the wishes of its current members. I am here to report on its past, and now, taking a backseat, I look forward to observing JAIS as it continues to flourish.

6. A Short Postscript

At the annual Congress of JAIS in September 2008, we decided to change its name to Japan Association for Interpretation and Translation Studies (JAITS). This decision was made in view of the rising interest in translation studies among our members, and of the need to create a forum for promoting scientific and academic studies of translation, our twin activity, based on the realization that existing bodies offered Japanese translators and students of translation few opportunities to carry out the kind of serious translation studies one finds in Europe today.

Masaomi Kondo was the Founding President of JAITS and continues active as a Special Advisor to the association. He is also a Professor of Economics and Interpreting Studies at Daito Bunka University in Tokyo.

1. This is a slightly adapted version of the presentation I gave at the XVIII World Congress of the International Federation of Translators (FIT) in Shanghai on Aug. 4-7, 2008, as part of the JAIS panel. The actual presentation was given spontaneously with the aid of the PowerPoint slides, except for the 'Personal Note' read out at the very end. The version published here includes my original remarks and a few additions, and has maintained the form of an essentially oral presentation.


5. Ibid. pp. 70-71 in particular.


7. Statute of JAIS.


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