

The Making of a Simultaneous Interpreter: How the U.S. Taxpayers' Money Was Put to Good Use

By Muramatsu Masumi

In the last four issues of this magazine, I have been sharing some of the more interesting and sometimes amusing anecdotes that I have collected during my interpreting career. Quite a few people have suggested that I write a memoir about the important conferences that I have interpreted for—a proposition I have always declined and will continue to decline.

Interpreters should never divulge the content of what they interpret. Often the conferences involve state secrets or proprietary business intelligence. The participants may write memoirs, but an interpreter should never write one. I will take whatever secrets I have heard—actually very few and none earth-shattering—to my grave.

I do enjoy, however, relating humorous anecdotes and jokes that my clients have told, provided that it does not in the slightest way constitute a breach of confidentiality or embarrass them. Plenty of such material can be reproduced without contextual background and still be informative and entertaining.

Frankly I do not remember the kind of delicate details that people press me to tell them. Nonetheless, they insist that I must know a great deal, and it is fun to keep them guessing how much I know.

My resume credits me as the principal Japanese interpreter for the first nine G-7 Summit meetings, from Rambouillet (1975) to Williamsburg (1983). The summit is probably the most prestigious, if not the most glamorous, assignment for professional simultaneous interpreters in Japanese, English, French, German, and Italian. Every serious interpreter hopes to serve at this high level some day. Though my last summit was 13 years ago, I take modest pride in having trained many younger

interpreters who follow in my footsteps.

The climb to any summit must, of course, begin at the foot of the mountain. I first became an interpreter in 1950 when I was 19. After working for some six years for a U.S. Occupation unit in Tokyo and its successor organization following the signing of the Peace Treaty, I had the good fortune of being hired by the U.S. State Department as a simultaneous interpreter in 1956.

That was the first year of America's well-planned and well-financed program to provide technical assistance to Japan. The State Department, through its adjunct outfit called the International Cooperation Administration (I.C.A.), had already been conducting the program for the war-fatigued Allies as well as some former European foes and some East European and Latin American countries.

The assistance took the form of large-scale invitation programs. Beginning in 1956, the I.C.A. started inviting many "productivity study teams" from Japan to the United States. Each team focused on a specific topic and consisted of 12 members drawn from industry, business, government, and labor unions. Each team was served by a project manager and two simultaneous interpreters, and each toured America for six weeks.

The wonderful thing about this program was that it was entirely financed, at least for the first few years, by U.S. taxpayers. It was typical of postwar



The writer (holding the microphone) interprets for a nuclear safety study team visiting the U.S. (1960).

America to extend this kind of generosity to help Japan get back on its feet. This program aimed specifically at teaching Japanese industrialists and others the secret of American productivity—or the art of making widgets, conducting R&D, managing labor relations, etc., most effectively in terms of "productivity," a new concept.

When the U.S. government first approached Japan with this idea, MITI decided to establish Japan Productivity Center, a nongovernment, nonprofit organization to serve as the implementing agency for the program. Productivity efforts, the U.S. maintained, required full cooperation among industry, labor, and academia. A nongovernment agency, it was felt, would best gain the necessary cooperation from all parties concerned.

The subjects of study were indeed multifarious. They covered manufacturing industries, such as steel, automobiles, machine tools, and electrical appliances. Some study teams looked into specific disciplines, such as labor-management relations, regional

development, nuclear power, materials handling, and quality control.

Yes, quality control. Today most Americans think quality control is a Japanese speciality. Most Japanese think it is as well and all too often proudly lecture Americans and others on how to make things more productively. But the original concept is actually as American as apple pie. Drs. W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran were the pioneers of statistical quality control. Japanese industry had already been a keen student of these experts' teachings, but it was these productivity study teams that effectively disseminated this new tool to a wide spectrum of Japanese industries, including the service industry.

The success of this ambitious bilateral technical cooperation program hinged upon good communication between the mentors and the students. Very few of the invited Japanese specialists had a sufficient command of spoken English, and virtually none of the American hosts spoke Japanese well enough to convey their sophisticated technical message to the visitors.

The I.C.A. had already successfully employed simultaneous interpreting in French, German, Spanish, and other languages to assist their guests from Europe and Latin America. The Americans were quite creative. They decided to use simultaneous interpreting at all seated gatherings, such as briefings, presentations, or discussions, held in meeting rooms or board rooms. For walk-around factory tours and other field visits, interpretation naturally had to be "consecutive." This is the conventional way, with the speaker pausing every now and then for the interpreter to convert the spoken message from English into Japanese. Questions posed by the Japanese visitors would likewise be interpreted consecutively.

There were no soundproof booths for the interpreters, of course, because the teams were visiting a different firm, factory, or think tank every day, and none of them had interpreting facilities. We had to carry our own equipment with us.

Whenever a seated gathering was to

last more than half an hour, the interpreters would open their sturdy leather or aluminum carrying cases and deploy the interpreting equipment. It was primitive by today's standards: the main amplifier unit included several vacuum tubes (yet to be replaced by transistors), and to receive the Japanese interpretation the team members inserted their earphone plugs into sockets on a cord which was spread out on the table.

The two interpreters sat near the speakers and worked roughly on a 15-minute rotation basis. We listened to the speaker's words and whispered our interpretation into a hand-held microphone which was connected to the amplifier. It really had to be whispered or otherwise our voices would annoy the speakers and also impair our ability to hear them.

It only took one session to accustom the Japanese team members to this novel way of communication. They appreciated the convenience and efficiency for we could accomplish twice as much as with consecutive interpreting. Explaining the mechanics to the American hosts was a bit more difficult. Many simply could not understand how we could listen and talk at the same time. The moment we started whispering, some speakers would just stop talking and stare at us. We soon learned the trick of politely gesturing to them to continue.

Some of our hosts were rather naive about foreign languages and interpreting. They simply could not comprehend that we could instantaneously translate verbally what they were saying into another language. Several times I jokingly told them that the little "black box" (the amplifier) really performed the magic, and we were just blowing air into the mike. A few people nearly believed it!

My very first assignment in 1956 was a tour with the Electrical Contractors Productivity Study Team. Taking us around the country from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., was the project manager from the I.C.A. He was an affable, retired businessman in his '60s and soon became a respected and well-liked guide, chaperone, adviser,

and father figure to the team members. These were characteristics I often found in the I.C.A. project managers.

In addition to the electrical contractors group, I served teams studying civil engineering, quality control, materials handling, top management, gray iron foundry, die casting, the industrial use of radioisotopes, tourism, and other topics. I also interpreted for a group of Diet members. Altogether I accompanied 30 six-week tours from 1956 through 1960.

We interpreted practically every day. Our learning curve rose sharply because in most instances we saw the factory, construction site, or nuclear reactor in the morning and discussed it that afternoon. The interpreters gained some firsthand, if superficial, knowledge—as much as any non-specialists could—and thus were able to interpret fairly intelligently.

It is a pity that this extensive teaching/learning program, which lasted into the 1960s, seems to have been largely forgotten in Japan today. The generosity America demonstrated in financing the tours and opening factory gates to us, the home hospitality visits, and the kindness of strangers—all these are today little remembered or appreciated.

The Japanese proved to be good students. Some Japanese industries became very productive and highly competitive under their mentors' tutelage. Now Japan offers somewhat similar training programs to many nations, mostly developing countries, through governmental or other agencies. But it seems to me that we could emulate the imaginative approach to communication—simultaneous interpreting—taken by the U.S. government and make the Japanese taxpayers' money work more productively. pm

[Fourth in a six-part series]

Muramatsu Masumi is the chairman of Simul International, Inc. He has acted as interpreter for numerous important international conferences. They include nine summit meetings of heads of state and government of the seven industrialized nations.