

The Birth of a Profession: The Stuff Simultaneous Interpreters Are Made of

By *Muramatsu Masumi*

And so it was forty years ago that Japan's very first cadre of eight simultaneous interpreters was born, thanks to the U.S. government's technical assistance program, designed to pull Japan's industry back to its feet. (This picks up the history where the last issue of this "Reflections" series, entitled "The Making of a Simultaneous Interpreter: How the U.S. Taxpayers' Money Was Put to Good Use," left off.)

The eight eager and energetic men, ranging in age between 25 (I was one) and 40—something, had successfully passed the first-ever test conducted in Japan to check people's aptitude for simultaneous interpreting.

We had come from different walks of life. The oldest was a college accounting professor; one was a Tokyo U.S. Embassy staffer; two had taken a leave of absence from their employers (an airline and a bank gladly seconded them to the project); and some, like the writer, had quit their jobs.

Some of us had studied at American colleges (like Duke and the University of Oregon), but I hadn't. Two of us (including myself) had been interpreters for the U.S. military in Japan. But none of us had any experience of simultaneous interpreting; in fact, none of us had ever even heard of it until only a day or so before we were to take the test.

The search for those of simultaneous-interpreter material began in the autumn of 1955. The I.C.A., or International Cooperation Administration of the U.S. State Department (not to be confused with the CIA, thanks), was in charge. It had until just before then been known as the Foreign Operations Administration, a somewhat clandestine-sounding appellation.

The U.S. and Japanese governments had agreed to institute a well-organized, well-financed (mostly by the U.S. side) program for bringing hundreds, eventually thousands, of Japanese industrialists for extensive

observation and study tours in the U.S. On the Japanese side, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) chose not to get directly involved owing to certain political considerations. But with its encouragement and blessing, the Japan Productivity Center was created, a non-profit body supported mainly by business but with nominally equal tripartite participation by business, labor, and academia. It was felt that direct MITI involvement would alienate the more militant elements of Japan's organized labor from coming on board.

Up until that time there had never been any systematic effort to train simultaneous interpreters, or in fact even conventional (i.e. consecutive) interpreters, between English and Japanese. The U.S. State Department's Language Services Division had substantial experience in testing and hiring European-language interpreters to satisfy various diplomatic needs. And the I.C.A. had been employing many such interpreters for the "productivity study teams" that they had been bringing to the U.S. from several European countries.

The recruiting team consisted of the chief of the Language Services Division, Mrs. Nora Lejins, and a nice, old Nisei (Japanese-American) gentleman by the name of Mr. Yoshioka. Setting up shop in the U.S. Embassy "Annex," a building then called the Mantetsu Biru as it had housed the pre-war Manchurian Railway Company, which was one of several sturdy modern buildings spared (probably by design) from the U.S. air raids in World War II.

At that time I was one of the most senior, and actually the second highest-paid, interpreters with MAAG-J, or the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group-Japan. It had gone under two or three different names, "advising" the Japanese National Police Reserve, National Safety Force, and then the Self-Defense Forces (ground, maritime, and eventually air), as Japan's de facto

rearmament progressed.

One day a Japanese friend of mine, working for the U.S. Embassy, called me and recommended that I take the test for "simultaneous interpreters" (I asked her, "What? How can anyone listen and talk at the same time?") for a certain Japan Productivity Center (I asked her if it had anything to do with procreation). At first I didn't think I would dare try it; but she insisted that I should—nothing to lose.

And I am forever grateful to Mrs. "Terry" Saito for her adamancy. She was my contemporary but, with more formal education than I had then, was already an interpreter when I was a 19-year-old clerk-typist. She and other older men and women who were interpreting for the U.S. Occupation unit overseeing the government of Tokyo metropolis and then of the eight-prefecture "Kanto region," including Nagano and Shizuoka, provided me with role models.

I envied them for the glamour, the prestige, and the salary interpreters could command. I studied English hard, went to college at night, and finally, through considerable temerity, or chutzpah, talked my boss into making me an interpreter. I am glad those interpreters didn't look superhuman to me; I thought I could become one of them. Perhaps it was just the power of positive thinking; but my senior colleagues blessed and encouraged me in my aspiration.

Actually I had earlier helped Terry find her embassy job when she needed it, because I had by then cultivated good working and personal connections with the embassy. And she paid me back more than amply by finding me a lead into a unique, most stimulating and satisfying profession, of which I was to become one the earliest and probably the longest-practicing members.

The day came for the test. I recall that I felt no particular sensation, or expectation, for I had no idea what I was

walking into. On the table in a small conference room was a tape recorder, one of the old-fashioned reel variety, a leviathan compared to what we know as a tape recorder today. It was, in fact, not long after "tape" had replaced "wire" as the magnetic medium for recording sound.

When my turn came to take the test, Mrs. Lejins told me to put on a headset, with two huge padded earphones, listen to the speech in English (President Eisenhower's message to Congress on the state of education), and simultaneously interpret it into Japanese! The important thing, I was told, was not to pause, but to keep on translating.

The next several minutes (probably no more than 10 minutes, but it felt like forever) were the most excruciating mental torture I had known. I heard the words "a shortage of qualified school teachers" and not much of the rest. Well, the message clearly was to remind the U.S. nation that the country needed more and better school teachers.

The moment I began speaking in Japanese, translating what few words I managed to hear, my own voice reverberated in my skull and pretty much blocked my ears from hearing anything. I caught words here and words there in between my utterances in Japanese, tried to imagine what Ike was talking about, and kept on talking in Japanese as if I were the U.S. president telling his people they had to do something to produce more and better qualified teachers if they were to have a better future, etc.

Much of it was sheer guesswork, but it was what I later learned to call an "educated guess." Ike wasn't likely to be saying the country needed more run-of-the-mill or mediocre teachers: it needed better ones. And definitely the country had to do something more to realize that goal, not do something less, and so forth. Once the main thrust of the message was clear, one could fairly well imagine the rest.

And that was what I was doing. The kindly old Nisei, Mr. Yoshioka, was listening to my Japanese rendition through his headset. I saw him, out of the corner of my eye, nodding approvingly; so I felt somewhat comforted. That night,



Photo: Sakurai Kan

however, I had a nightmare and a splitting headache. I was convinced that I was a failure and that listening and talking at the same time was definitely a most unhealthy exercise. How little of the future I was able to see in my crystal ball!

All the collected tapes of the candidates, some 50 or 60 as I learned later, were taken back to Washington. They were listened to again by Mr. Yoshioka and some other examiners. And from that group, they chose eight.

The notice came on Christmas Day, 1955. It was, and still is, the best Christmas present I have ever received. I was being hired as a simultaneous interpreter and was to await further instruction about departure and reporting for duty in Washington.

Sometime later we were told that those who passed the test were the ones who kept on talking, without pauses or blanks, but always with contextual consistency—in other words, never saying anything that didn't make sense or that contradicted the thrust of the speech. This ability, or skill, which can be improved only if you have a certain aptitude, is of crucial importance in the making of a simultaneous interpreter.

Even the best and the brightest in this profession occasionally fail to hear a word or a phrase, but unlike in the case of consecutive interpretation or unless

you are in the most informal of circumstances, you are unable to ask the speaker to repeat or clarify. This is when an educated guess makes the difference between a good interpretation and, sometimes, a total disaster.

Mr. Yoshioka, that meek monitor at our initial test, later sat to observe the training sessions at the State Department during the first three weeks of orientation, when each of us took turns doing simultaneous interpreting in a temporarily installed telephone-booth-like contraption (which we soon nicknamed the "torture chamber"). Much to our relief, he was dozing off very often, but pretending to be listening, muttering, "Very good! Very good!" every now and then. When he was doing that, we used to just mumble some nonsense for a break. Now that we are some of the best professionals anywhere, Mr. Yoshioka can sleep in peace. ■

[Fifth in a six-part series]

Muramatsu Masumi is the chairman of Simul International, Inc. He has acted as interpreter for numerous important international conferences. His latest book in Japanese is on humor in leadership (Shidoshatachi no Humor).