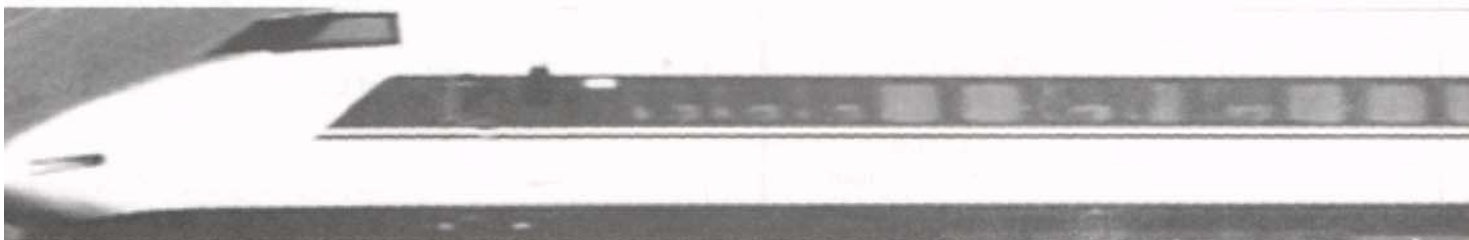# Reading One Language, Writing Another

Interview with Carl Kay, Japan–based Consultant and Board Member of Japan Translation Federation

by Bert Esselink

Language International: You graduated from the Japanese studies program at Harvard. How well did your education prepare you for the "real world" of translation and localization?

Carl Kay: My Japanese study at Harvard, including one year studying in Japan, gave me a good solid base in the language and culture. But my interest in translation came from inside myself, not the curriculum. The challenges I confronted in college trying to translate Japanese classical poetry into English taught me lessons I have continued to apply for over 20 years in the technical translation and localization fields.

LI: You ran your own company, Japanese Language Services, from 1982 to 1998, when you sold the company to Lionbridge. What have you done since you sold Japanese Language Services?

CK: I worked for Lionbridge from 1998-1999. I was the only Asia-based member of the company's senior management team during the company's period of rapid growth and its IPO. Members of my old company continue to play important roles at Lionbridge today.

Since taking a year off in 2000 I have become a Consultant and/or Outside Di-

rector at seven companies in Japan and North America, in the areas of translation/localization, media and marketing, systems integration and e-learning. I am also the only non-Japanese Board Member of the Japan Translation Federation.

LI: What is the state of the translation and localization industry in Japan? For example, how are individuals and companies organized; how does it compare to the situation in Europe?

CK: Japan has a very large translation market, but the perception of the translator as a "professional" still lags behind the situation in Europe. Also, the demand here is

overwhelmingly into and out of English, so translation companies don't get much scale from multi-language projects. As a result, most translation companies are very small.

In localization specifically, the major global firms such as Lionbridge dominate the

Small, specialized firms in areas like biotechnology patent translation will thrive.

Tokyo scene, though most of the work is into-Japanese for clients outside Japan. Except for games and some equipment interfaces, Japan doesn't export much software that needs localization from Japanese into other languages.

LI: In this issue of Language International, a teacher of Englishtown.com comments that Japanese people seriously lack verbal communication skills in English. Does this still pose serious problems for companies doing business in Japan?

CK: Not superficially. There are usually people who speak English at most companies. More challenging than language is the culture. Can your organization and your Japanese counterpart work together effectively? Cultural differences reflected in such areas as corporate governance, marketing strategies, distributor support, etc. can cause problems. Some of my current consulting work involves these issues.

LI: What factors go into making the business case to localize for Japan?

CK: The requirement to enable software for double-byte processing, and the need to adapt products for strong cultural preferences in Japan, can make localization for Japan expensive. But Japan, even in an economic slump, remains the world's second largest market for most technology products. The coming period of drastic economic dislocation here may, in fact, make technology investments more critical for survival. So I expect Japanese to remain a "Tier One" localization language for the foreseeable future.

LI: What has been the most important development in the translation and localization industry in the past decade?

CK: The global availability of Starbucks coffee. Seriously, the emergence of large global localization firms, riding the wave of globalization of IT, is clearly the big story. Of course the challenges of scalability and profitability have not been fully overcome yet, but this wave has dramatically raised the level of technology and the visibility of the translation business.

LI: Have technical developments such as translation memory tools and software user interface tools also been adopted on a large scale in the Japanese translation industry?

CK: Trados has developed a strong presence here, as suppliers to the global localization firms have adapted to market requirements. On the other hand, the lack of professionalism and scale I mentioned earlier probably constrain capital investment in tools in the broader Japanese translation market.

LI: Is it true that Machine Translation systems for Japanese-English language combinations are very advanced these days and produce better results than equivalent systems with European languages?

CK: Japanese companies and the government have invested in a world-class MT effort. However, the linguistic distance between Japanese and English is huge, almost inconceivably so, to people who only know European languages. Even moderate complexity in the source text can lead to

More challenging than language is the culture. Can your organization and your Japanese counterpart work together effectively?

gibberish output. Commercial use of MT here is thus still extremely limited and experimental in nature.

LI: How do you see the translation and localization profession developing in the next ten years?

CK: I expect less reliance on just words to communicate complicated information, as

the cost of transmitting high quality video, virtual environments etc. becomes trivial.

Industry-wise, I think that the global localization firms are here to stay, though even a little more consolidation may be needed to reach stability. Small, specialized firms in areas like biotechnology patent translation will thrive. I think there is

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room for a translation e-marketplace or two to survive. Maybe somebody in Japan will harness the low cost translation talent in China the way they have done in manufacturing.

Machine translation remains the big wild card. I think it is inevitable that there will be a move towards controlled writing of documentation as the only way to drive MT quality good enough for wide commercial use. The question is the timing, and whether writer-friendly software tools can be developed to speed up adoption of controlled writing.

Meanwhile, translation will remain reading one language and writing another, with all the joys and challenges it has always offered.