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SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING IN JAPAN AND THE ROLE OF TELEVISION A PERSONAL NARRATION

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Simultaneous interpreting between Japanese and other languages was not practiced by even a few interpreters until the late 1950s. It became a general practice at conferences in about the mid-1960s. Until then, most of the interpreting was consecutive.

Shortly after the surrender of Japan in 1945, ending World War II, and the arrival of the American occupation forces, I was asked by some officers of the occupation to assist in their contacts with the Japanese. Being a Japanese government official at that time and having received a general order by my government to cooperate to the fullest with the occupation authorities, I took leave from my regular job and started working for the occupation headquarters from the autumn of 1945. For over five years, I assisted in liaison work, which often involved interpreting between the Japanese and Americans.

There were others, both Japanese and Americans, who also served as interpreters. We always provided consecutive interpreting in those early years of the occupation. Shortly after the establishment of the United Nations in 1947, the press carried the news of simultaneous interpreting in the UN. The American officials of the occupation, seeing the report, suggested that we interpreters at headquarters ought to interpret simultaneously between Japanese and English.

Everyone of us interpreters rejected the idea outright, insisting that since the word order of Japanese was almost exactly the reverse of that of English, simultaneous interpreting was impossible. When the Tokyo International Tribunal took place, concluding with sentences of the so-called "class A war criminals" in December 1948, the interpreters for the trials took the same position on simultaneous interpreting. The interpreting in court was consecutive. Only when a prepared text was translated and provided to the interpreters working in a booth did a form of simultaneous interpreting take place, with the interpreter reading off the translation, following sentence by sentence the original text being read in court.

In my frequent role as interpreter at the occupation headquarters in Tokyo, I would sit next to an American official surrounded by half a dozen Japanese officials. Each statement made by either side was interpreted through me consecutively. When the American spoke and the Japanese waited for my interpretation, I assumed that this was a logical use of time. But when a Japanese spoke and then waited while I gave this statement in English to the American, I began to feel that it was a waste of time for the several other Japanese who had to wait until I had finished. After many months of this practice, I began to be more adept at interpreting consecutively and found that I could begin the moment most of the Japanese sentence was expressed and that I only had to pause briefly until I heard the end of the Japanese statement where the verb appeared, at which moment I could complete the interpreting in English. Thus, I sometimes inter-

preted in a low voice to the American many of the Japanese statements almost simultaneously.

By about 1952, I found I could interpret simultaneously between the two languages in either direction. Another person, Yukika Sohma, who was not in the profession but who frequently interpreted for various foreign visitors, could also interpret excellently between Japanese and English. She and I were perhaps the first ones in Japan to do this simultaneously.

In the mid-1950s teams of Japanese businessmen and engineers began going to the United States to visit American plants and study how to improve productivity. These "productivity teams" were accompanied by Japanese tour conductors who served as interpreters. A staff of such interpreters were trained at the U.S. Department of State, where such skills as note-taking and simultaneous interpreting were taught. The productivity team trips continued through the 1960s and helped in developing a group of excellent interpreters. Today, some of the leading simultaneous and consecutive interpreters between Japanese and English are those who received their training during the productivity team program.

A significant step in bringing simultaneous interpreting to the attention of the Japanese general public took place over television. The earliest instance of this type of interpreting, to the best of my knowledge, occurred in the late 1950s, when Vladimir K. Zworykin, renowned for his research and development work in color television, gave a televised lecture in Japan on color TV receivers. I was placed in a booth overlooking the lecture hall and interpreted his lecture simultaneously, with my voice being broadcasted. This program was telecast live in the afternoon of a working day, and so the viewing audience was small. There were some other broadcasts in the early 1960s that also employed simultaneous interpreting. The visit of Robert Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy to Japan in early 1963 received wide public attention, since he was not only the Attorney General of the United States but also the brother of President John F. Kennedy. The Kennedys appeared several times on television during their one-week visit, and I had to interpret for them simultaneously in both directions in the telecasts.

Simultaneous interpreting received the widest public attention during the telecasts of the Apollo flights to the moon, conducted from 1968 to 1972. The first such telecast in Japan took place in the autumn of 1968, when Apollo 7 orbited the earth and sent TV pictures from the spacecraft. NHK, the nationwide public broadcasting network in Japan, received the telecast from the United States by satellite relay and broadcasted it live in Japan. In preparation for this telecast, the first that took place from outer space, NHK initially asked Simul International, a group of interpreters who had established a sound reputation in conference interpreting, to provide simultaneous interpreting of the voice communication from Apollo 7 into Japanese. However, since it was not known how technical the communication might be, this group contacted me to ask whether I would be willing to do the job, for I had a background in technology, having been an electronics engineer in a Japanese government laboratory for ten years. I replied that I would try, and NHK then contacted me.

In this first telecast from space, I interpreted from a booth into the earphones of the science commentator and scientists in the studio, who participated in the program. My voice did not go out over the air. There was very little voice communication between the NASA Flight Control Center outside of Houston, Texas, and the Apollo crew. This was reported by the commentator, who explained what was being said by the crew or Flight Control.

The next major program occurred in late December 1968, when Apollo 8 flew to the moon and orbited it, sending the first close-up TV pictures of the moon in history.

The telecasts over several days presented pictures of the flight to the moon, then views of the moon, and various reports. On the first program, I again interpreted simultaneously from a booth into the earphones of the commentator and scientists appearing in the studio. When I arrived at the TV studio for the second telecast, I was told that my voice was going to be broadcasted. I first expressed doubts, since I was not sure how good my interpreting would sound, for I had been interpreting solely for the information of those participating in the programs and not for general public listening. The studio staff explained that NHK had received complaints from the viewers, who said that they were not interested in a second-hand explanation of what the astronauts were saying but wanted to know directly what the actual voice communication exchanges were. My voice therefore went on the air. After the program, the staff assured me that my interpreting was acceptable.

The next time I went to the NHK studio, I found that my position had been changed from the booth to a table in the studio with a TV camera trained on it. "This time, we're putting you on camera", the staff said. I protested against this sudden change, since I did not want to have my face, scowling with concentration and with two big headphones looking like huge bumps on my ears, appear on the TV screens of the viewers. The staff said that NHK had received inquiries from viewers, asking "what kind of mysterious machine is doing the interpreting?" "We need to show the viewers that you're a human being and not a machine", explained the staff. From then on, through the remaining telecasts of Apollo 8 and all the other Apollo flights, I was on camera frequently while interpreting.

The most memorable flight was that of Apollo 11, which landed on the moon. For the first time in history men walked on the lunar surface and were shown on TV screens throughout the world. Public interest in Japan was very high, building up from the year before through the flights of Apollo 7, 8, 9, and 10, each of which was covered by NHK in live telecasts that I interpreted. When Apollo 11 was launched, the Japanese public followed its flight to the moon on several live telecasts. Then on the night of July 20, 1969, a Sunday in Japan, the lunar landing module on Apollo 11 separated from the command module to begin its descent to the moon's surface. At this stage, there were no television pictures but the procedure was reported from the lunar module by radio communication. NHK prepared a computer graphics image depicting the module's descent, timed with amazing accuracy to fit the actual procedures taking place on the spacecraft. Voice communication by radio between the lunar module, named "Eagle", and the control center at Houston was interpreted simultaneously into Japanese, so that viewers would understand what was going on as they saw the computer graphics image slowly descend towards the moon. When the Eagle landed, the voice of Neil Armstrong, the commander, reported, "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." There was an audible sigh of relief in the studio at this success.

The schedule called for several hours of rest and preparation in the lunar module before astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin were to venture out onto the moon's surface. I was invited to go to sleep in one of NHK's rooms until the time for the next telecast showing the astronauts on the moon. I had just begun to fall asleep when I was shaken awake to be informed that Armstrong had changed his mind and wanted to prepare to exit the lunar module as soon as feasible. Early on Monday morning, July 21, 1968, Japan time, the special NHK studio for this telecast series came alive with cameramen, technicians, program directors, and other participants. Since the historic event on the moon was to take place for many hours, NHK arranged to have two other interpreters support me through the long stretches of simultaneous interpreting. My two colleagues were Masao Kunihiro and Masanobu Miyahara.

Because of the change in procedure in the "Eagle", the telecast program began several hours ahead of schedule. The scientists and other personalities who were to appear on the program had to be informed and rushed to the studio. Some were to arrive from outside of Tokyo, where the NHK studio was located. And so the program began with only some of the participants present in the studio. The anchor man on this program, Kenji Suzuki, expertly kept the program moving smoothly in spite of the late arrival of many participants. One of the ways in which he filled in the time until the others arrived was to turn to me to report what NASA was saying. There was a stream of voice communication between "Eagle" and Houston as the astronauts prepared their life support systems, began the decompression of the lunar module, and conducted various tests prior to moving out. Much of this procedure I reported when Suzuki turned to me or interpreted simultaneously when signalled to do so. There were no TV pictures at this point, only voice communication.

Finally Armstrong said that he was going out. He then activated the TV camera outside the lunar module to show the first historic picture of him descending the ladder. As he arrived at the bottom of the ladder, he said, "Now I'm going to step off". As he stepped onto the surface of the moon, he said, "That's one small step for (a ?) man, one ..." The last portion of his statement could not be heard over the background noise in my headphones. I therefore could interpret only what sounded to me like the first half of his statement. Later, on a replay of the event, we received a telex of Armstrong's statement, which was, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind". I was thus able to interpret the complete statement during the news program when the event was replayed. Many years later I was to learn that even in the United States was no clearly heard during the live telecast.

The long program showing Armstrong and Aldrin walking on the moon took place in Japan from morning to about mid-afternoon. It was estimated that some two-thirds of the entire public saw the live telecast, and, if you include those who saw the replay a few hours later, nearly all of Japan witnessed this historic event through television.

While the viewership was not as high the other Apollo flights, Apollo 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 were also seen by the Japanese public during the next three years. Apollo 13, whose liquid oxygen tank exploded, forcing it to return to earth by making a U-turn around the moon in a serious emergency revision of the flight pattern, was a crisis-type telecast that was every bit as exciting as Apollo 11. In all of these telecasts, I had to interpret the communications.

A major task in preparing for each of the flights was the translation into Japanese of the many new technical terms coined in English, which were necessitated by the complex spacecraft and related systems. Before each flight, NASA issued a 200- to 300-page press kit describing the units of equipment to be used in the flight, the special experimental units to be installed on the lunar surface, the flight plan and schedule, and other related information. A list of new terms was also included. Together with the science commentator, Kenya Murano, and others of the NHK staff, I assisted in coining terms in Japanese to fit the English terminology. Of course I had to study the entire press kit as well as other literature on the subject to learn as much as feasible about the flight project.

The Japanese terms were often not as compact as the terms in English. For example, "portable life support system", an eight-syllable term in English for the large pack carried by the astronauts outside of their spacecraft in the vacuum of the moon's surface or space, turned out to be a fifteen-syllable phrase in Japanese. However, the astronauts never used the full term. Instead they called it the "PLISS". Acronyms do not exist in

Japanese. To shorten a long term, some of the *kanji* (the Chinese characters adopted in Japanese) are eliminated and the remaining few are contracted to represent the original term. In this case, the Japanese (*ke-i-ta-i-yo-o se-i-me-i iji so-o-chi*) could only be reduced by eliminating the first six syllables meaning "portable". Since the public was not familiar with these terms, it was necessary to retain enough of a contracted term to get the meaning across. Sometimes the meaning could be expressed without using a long technical term. If an astronaut asked Houston "What's the O₂ reading in my PLISS?", the Japanese interpretation could come out as "How much oxygen do I have left?" The lunar landing module, or lunar module, was translated into a Japanese term requiring eight syllables. The astronauts called in the "LEM", a one-syllable word. In Japanese I often simply said "lander", which was usually enough for the viewing audience to understand from the context of the scene and the rest of the related communication.

Although the interpreting on these space-related programs was announced as being "simultaneous", the actual interpreting had frequently to be what might be called "quick consecutive", since voice communication between Houston and the astronauts often consisted of short, brief bursts of exchanges using short sentences, with periods of silence between, which compelled and favored interpreting consecutively. There were also rather lengthy statements which required simultaneous interpreting.

One of the impediments to interpreting either consecutively or simultaneously during these telecasts was the background noise above which the voices of the speakers had to be recognized. Since the voice of an astronaut talking from the moon was transmitted by radio over a distance of some 400 000 kilometers to earth, then went through many electronic relays, was sent up to a satellite in space for transmission to Japan, where it was received and relayed to the NHK studio, it was a wonder that it could be heard at all. The background noise was a roar, so that it was almost like trying to hear someone shout above the roar of a typhoon. No matter how sophisticated the technology of space communication was, the voice suffered some degree of distortion through the numerous relays both on earth and by satellite. Such distortions, even when reduced by digital signals, still added another impediment.

The best an interpreter can do under such circumstances is to raise the volume of the sound to a high enough level to hear the voice as clearly as possible, in spite of the concurrent rise of the noise level. I had the technicians provide me with a volume control, so that I could boost the volume up as high as I needed to recognize the speakers' voices. Also, of course, the volume had to be high enough to avoid my own voice drowning out the original and causing blanks in my interpreting. Still, there were portions of the voice communication that were lost through fluctuations in the intensity of the signals or distortions. Such gaps could not be avoided, but in some cases it was possible to interpret the general meaning by extrapolating from the portion preceding and following the gap.

Television viewers could hear the original voice communication at a somewhat lower volume than my voice, which overlapped it. However, the original voice, being at a relatively low volume, was often difficult to understand because of the noise and distortions, even though the short sentences were voiced quickly before I interposed my quick consecutive interpreting.

The public exposure of simultaneous interpreting during the Apollo telecasts served to bring this art to the attention of the widest possible audience in Japan. Much interest was aroused not only in the astronauts and flights themselves but also in the art of simultaneous interpreting. Articles appeared in popular magazines about it. Newspapers carried stories. TV programs even included interviews on interpreting. A large Japanese bank conducted a survey of young Japanese, asking them what occupation

they aspired to. The largest number chose "simultaneous interpreter". For a while, this occupation had the image of a glamorous profession. Fortunately reality has helped to reduce the glamour today.

The sustained series of Apollo flight TV programs undoubtedly raised both public awareness and occupational aspirations about interpreting. Also the increasing numbers of international conferences in Japan created a demand for competent conference interpreters. Today a large number of persons have acquired the ability to interpret simultaneously between Japanese and English or some other language. There is no organization in Japan that embraces all the interpreters in the country, and so there is no reliable count of competent professional or semi-professional interpreters in Japan. However, schools of interpreting, with varying degrees of quality, have appeared in considerable numbers. The large numbers of international conferences and countless conferences among individuals and corporations almost always require interpreting, and this demand is being met by mainly Japanese interpreters.

Perhaps, the Apollo telecasts, which were a historic landmark in the reporting of space exploration, might also be considered a historic landmark in the advancement and awareness of simultaneous interpreting in Japan.