

Translation Pathfinders: A Creative Profession

Translators are needed more than ever today, and students of language and devotees of Japanese culture often ask: What are the qualities that make a good translator? What do I need to do to become one? What qualifications or credentials do I need to acquire? Can I make a living? What kind of work is there? How do you get work?

The answers to these questions would fill a book, but here are some suggestions from a translator who specializes in non-fiction, non-technical, general texts translated from Japanese to English.

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So far, translation is not even recognized as a profession. Some universities are beginning to offer courses in translation and advanced degrees, but the vast majority of working translators haven't earned or needed such qualifications to be successful. The best translators have solid academic credentials or are extraordinary self-learners, training with experienced senior translators, and a great deal of on-the-job experience.

What are the qualities that make a good translator?

Professional translation is work with texts and language, not so much with people, so it tends to be solitary work. Some think that anyone can translate if they but know two languages. To be a professional you need much more. You have to love language and writing and be well-versed in both. Usually a translator works from a foreign language into his or her own, so writing skill in the recipient language is a basic requirement. Translating non-fiction texts takes one into a wide variety of subjects, so it helps to have broad interests and a flexible mind. You have to have respect for the Japanese language and the conviction that meaning can be transferred from one language to another.

A strong mastery of Japanese is a given, but knowing a lot about Japan is the prerequisite for reading between the lines, understanding context, and deciphering ambiguity. Many J-E translators start out with speaking fluency and three or four years of Japanese-language courses for a solid grounding syntax and grammar. An extended sojourn living in Japan is crucial. Experience takes you from there. Relying on dictionaries and a library of reference works in your field, experienced colleagues, the Internet, friends, relatives, and contacts in your daily life, you build the tools of your trade around you as you go.

Humility, tolerance, stick-to-it-iveness, and patience with detail are also useful attributes.

Can I make a living?

A quite good one, if you pick a field in which you have some previous training

or special interest, cultivate a steady clientele, and approach your work professionally (i.e., make your time available, charge what your work is worth, perform conscientiously, and take responsibility for the product). Most successful translators work freelance, but many do so after working in some kind of translation or editorial office or with experienced senior translators in their early careers.

A freelancer has to manage his or her own time, take care of accounts, deal with clients, and keep on top of the technical tools of the trade (computers, software, databases, etc.). At first it is hard to work fast enough to earn a satisfactory wage, but this gradually improves.

Many translators work in or with small enterprises for professional support and as a buffer against income irregularities. These offices offer a good environment for teamwork between foreign and Japanese translators and between editors and translators. Work for large agencies is an alternative, but can be frustrating, both for lack of cooperation and feedback and when deadlines are tight and pay is low or irregular.

It is hard to give any figures on how much J-E translators earn and what their output per day might be. A translator working in an ad agency could conceivably receive as much for one line (40 characters) of text as another working on a scholarly text would get for 1000 characters' worth. A line from a consumer marketing report and a line from a thesis by intellectual historian Maruyama Masao take different amounts of time to finish. A successful corporation will willingly pay twice as much for the 800 characters of their "message from the president" as a poor archaeologist can afford for as much of his study of artifacts of the Jōmon period.

A translator with the discipline to maintain an average daily output can do quite well. One constant challenge is to maintain a flow of work, but not too much. This flood or famine situation can be controlled to a certain extent by cultivating a circle of professional friendships through which to pass on overflow or absorb the overflow of others. The ir-

regularity of a translator's income is another occupational hazard.

What kind of work is there?

The word "translation" evokes for most people either literature or computer manuals. Literature makes the biggest splash when a novel sells and becomes the talk of the critics, but it's hard to make a living on royalties. Most literature translators have a permanent job, such as in teaching, or do technical or other translation on the side. With technical manuals, you can make a good living, but there is no splash, and you may long for a way to work more creatively with words. For those with a technical background and an interest in Japan, however, translation can be a good marriage of skills.

In between these two extremes, there is a vast market for translation in non-fiction writing: scholarly papers, research reports, Japanese government publications, journalism, cultural exchange, art or craft catalogs, film or narration scripts, language teaching or educational resources, corporate brochures, symposium reports, and the list goes on. These are fields through which a translator with a liberal arts background, a solid knowledge of Japan, and an open mind can roam as a professional. It's a wonderful way to indulge a hunger for knowledge and diverse interests while being useful and earning a living.

Non-fiction translation is one of the fields in which there is an urgent need for dedicated professionals, but it demands a whole set of skills that many freelance translators find daunting. Works of literature or fiction, not to mention technical manuals are translated relatively straightforwardly, without rearranging or amplifying the text. In non-fiction work, expository writing rules are different in Japanese and English and things may need to be explained to a non-Japanese readership that could be abbreviated in the original. In this type of work, therefore, the translator is required to be an editor and creative writer as well. In the next article in this series, we'll look at the complexities of non-fiction translation.