

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

The Adventures of an American Court Reporter in Japan

BY JODI HARMON

“Things are very different in Japan” is a common phrase — almost a cliché. But truer words have never been spoken.

I began reporting in 1982 at the tender age of 17. My boss had to swear in witnesses for me until I turned 18, which is the legal age to be a notary public in New York. In 2000, my passion for both traveling and realtime reporting inspired me to start freelancing internationally. I love experiencing foreign cultures, meeting other court reporters, and learning what reporting is like in other parts of the world. Frequently, I walk into foreign court reporting offices and

introduce myself, which has led to great friends and amazing freelance opportunities around the globe.

So, on my first trip to Japan, it was only natural to seek out English-speaking court reporters. While searching for reporting on the Internet without success, I discovered Bill Lise, one of a small number of native-English-speaking deposition interpreters in the country. Bill thought it would be fun for us to get together with Paul Diserio, a certified legal videographer and long-time resident in Japan. A few days later, we met in Tokyo — three expatriates working in a niche market — and the idea to launch Japan’s first court reporting agency was born.

The social, legal, and cultural challenges in Japan are daunting, and teaming up with those two saved me from personal and professional embarrassment many times.

Take, for example, the simple act of meeting someone. The Japanese present business cards — with two hands and a bow — in a ritualistic manner that has all the rules and dictates of a religious

ceremony. I wish I had known that custom when I first arrived.

In the United States, I would collect everyone’s business card at the start of a deposition and arrange them in front of me like a seating chart. Then I would jot down a few identifying features on the cards, like *red tie* or *blue shirt*. That way, if the attendees ended up in another part of the room after lunch, I would know who was who.

Shortly after my first case was over, one of the interpreters told me that all the Japanese attendees were aghast when they saw me writing on their cards. Apparently marking up someone’s business card — their *meishi* — was considered offensive, if not downright insulting. I was horrified to hear this comment given the number of times I had done it. This learning experience showed me how different the Japanese culture can be and how important it is to have people on my team who can keep me in line, who know their way around, and who understand how to get things done in Japan appropriately and efficiently.

In Japan, the most interesting challenge a court reporter has is, ironically, a legal one. It is actually illegal to take depositions in Japan, with one exception: Under diplomatic agreement, depositions are permitted if conducted at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo or Consulate in Osaka, where conference rooms are designated for this purpose. But this situation comes with its own set of challenges, including strict visa requirements for attendees, nonrefundable deposits for the rooms, limited hours, and the fact that no depositions can be held on holidays (American or Japanese) or weekends. All the rules are enforced by guards or U.S. Marines.

When a Marine came to escort me out of the building at 5:01 p.m. — even though my equipment was far from packed up — I learned the hard way how strict these rules are. There are even stories of attorneys and court reporters being thrown out of the country for attempting to disregard the rules by taking a deposition in a hotel room.

Although the depositions are interpreted, reporting can be difficult because of Japanese phonetics (see sidebar on page 25). Two main interpreters switch off hourly. So just when you get the hang

COMMON JAPANESE PHONETICS

Japanese phonetics are a challenge. I’ve found that mastering four finger-spelling alphabets rather than relying on writing phonetically to be essential for superior realtime. Here are some examples of common phonetics used particularly in proper names and geographical terms in Japan:

	jimi	saka
ashi	kami	saki
awa	kawa	-san (as in Jodi-san)
bashi	kura	sawa
gawa	maki	shita
gaya	mita	ushi
“i” (pronounced “ee”)	moshi	ya
ishi	moto	yama
ji	mura	yushi
jima	oshi	

Common sound-alike geographical names:

Kyoto	Asagaya	Shimbashi
Kyushu	Asaka	Shinmachi
Kyobashi	Asakura	Shinagawa
Kappabashi	Azusawa	Shirakawa
		Shirokane
Asakusa	Shikoku	Shirayama
Akasaka	Shinjuku	Shibuya

of one interpreter's speech pattern, they switch.

And then there is a "check interpreter" whose job, I'm told, is to double-check the main interpreter's translation and to interject if that person believes there was an error. Frequently, we are off the record for three or four minutes at a time while the interpreters battle it out in Japanese. Being the cynic that I am after 23 years of observing attorneys' shenanigans, I sometimes wonder if the check interpreters are secretly told to interfere as often as possible.

Most depositions are realtimed, and I feel this is one of our profession's most shining hours. The Japanese sentence structure is the opposite of ours. Japanese verbs are often last, whereas, in English, verbs appear earlier in a sentence. Also, Japanese speakers typically omit pronouns and plurals while speaking. All these differences make simultaneous interpreting nearly impossible. Before realtime, interpreters wrote out each sentence out on paper in order to begin

interpreting, a process that enormously delayed the deposition. But with realtime, interpreters are able to see the entire statement and to interpret more contemporaneously, which helps the deposition go much faster.

Another challenge of reporting in Japan is lack of support and supplies. Because there are no stenomachine repair centers, few English-speaking computer stores, and time-zone challenges for tech support, we found it necessary to keep several extra stenomachines, laptops, and copies of software and to rotate their use periodically to make sure they were always working. Even printing presents a problem. Because there is only A4 paper available, the firm must cut the paper to size or outsource our printing back to the United States. All of those challenges, added to the regular stress of our profession, make life as a court reporter in Japan anything but boring.

The Japanese are gracious, polite, and respectful. No one seems stressed out or

in a hurry. If you look lost, even people who can't speak English will stop to help. I have never heard horns honking, sirens blaring, cursing, or road rage. Cell phones are kept on vibrate, and the Japanese will step outside to speak on one. The country is spotless, is relatively safe, and has a rich history and culture. Last, but definitely not least, the food is heaven!

Although I struggle to speak the language, the people here remain very patient with me. And a sign in my serviced apartment proves I must be equally patient as they struggle with English: "Please take advantage of the maid."

In spite of the cultural challenges and limitations on reporting in Japan, I am thankful every day for the opportunity to live and work in this fascinating culture.

Jodi Harmon, RMR, CRR, is president of American Realtime Court Reporters in Japan. She can be reached at Jodi@americanrealtime.com or www.americanrealtime.com.