

# International Certification Study: Japan

By Jiri Stejskal

With the article on Denmark in the August issue we completed our overview of the highly regulated governmental certification systems in the Nordic countries. We will now examine certification in Japan, which represents the opposite side of the spectrum with no governmental involvement and with multiple certification systems being run by multiple professional and educational organizations. Contrary to the Scandinavian model, most of the Japanese certification programs have no eligibility requirements and provide for multiple-level certification, ranging from elementary knowledge of foreign language to expert translation capabilities.

Collecting information for this article proved to be particularly challenging because most of the relevant websites are available only in Japanese. Therefore, the information presented here relies on the following individuals who were willing to share their knowledge: Fred Uleman, a member of the Japanese Society of Translators (JST) and the Japanese Association of Translators (JAT); Tomoki Hotta, who, in addition to being the part-time executive director of the Japan Translation Association (JTA) in charge of a publicity committee and certification procedures, is the executive director of Babel Co., Ltd., and a member of the Northern California Translators Association; and Chuichi Kamei, a former liaison officer with the International Federation of Translators (FIT), and a member of JAT and the Japan Translation Federation (JTF), where he serves as the “Sanyo” (advisor or counselor).

It is not an easy task to navigate among the great number of organizations for translators and interpreters in Japan, and this article does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment

of the subject. To my knowledge, the following organizations in Japan offer certification programs for translators and interpreters:

- Japan Society for Technical Communication (JSTC)
- Japan Translation Association (JTA)
- Japan Translation Federation, Inc. (JTF)
- Honyaku-Jutsumu Kyoiku Gakuin
- National Council of Professional Translators
- Business Education Academy
- Babel Co., Ltd.
- Japan Association for Technical Communication (JATEC)

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In addition to these organizations, Japanese translators and interpreters can join JAT or JST. Neither of these organizations, however, offers certification. They are mentioned here because the subject of certification has apparently been discussed within JAT a number of times, always with a negative result, with the administrative considerations (graders, proctors) being major dissuaders, in addition to the doubts of JAT members as to whether such a certification program would have any meaning in the real-life marketplace. For the same reason, JAT does not recognize

certifications earned elsewhere. Even though JAT has cordial relationships with JTA and JTF, which have certification programs (described below), many JAT members view these organizations’ programs as efforts to generate revenues rather than as serious contributions to the quality of translation in Japan. Fred Uleman (fmu@gol.com) can provide further information in this respect. JST, another major player in the Japanese translation industry that does not offer certification, is Japan’s only full-status member of FIT. Selected Japanese organizations, for whom the certification process is meaningful and who believe that it enhances the quality of the translation and interpretation profession in Japan, are introduced below.

## Japan Translation Association

In 1987, JTA received permission from the Ministry of Labor to be established as an association. The objective of JTA was to objectively measure the knowledge and technical skills of translators in the industrial area, and its current Translator Qualification Examination is apparently the most authoritative examination of technical translation skill in Japan. Following the discontinuation of public certification in 2001 due to the policy of privatization and deregulation introduced by the Japanese government, the association decided to continue using the Translator Qualification Examination as its qualifying examination.

The evaluations are intended for the fields of natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. There are four levels of achievement. The tests are geared toward “industrial translation,” and each level is comprised of both a knowledge examination and a technical skill ➡

examination. Every person who passes the exam is conferred a title by JTA according to his or her field and level (e.g., “Level 1 Translator [English–Natural Sciences]”). The four individual levels are:

- Level 4: Practical translation experience in basic language skills, particularly in English, is required.
- Level 3: The applicant must be proficient in comprehension, language expression, and have fundamental specialized knowledge in practical translation.
- Level 2: For persons with more than three years of practical translation experience. Even though the person hasn’t yet attained the level of a professional translator, it is necessary to have a skill level in which the person could become a professional with a small amount of correction.
- Level 1: For people with more than six years of practical translation experience. A mandatory requirement is to have not only a high level of proficiency in English expression, but also to be highly accomplished in written Japanese.

### **Babel Co., Ltd. and Babel University**

In addition to the “English Translation Grammar Proficiency Test,” which is an entry-level test for translators, Babel Co., Ltd. offers a “Professional Translation Proficiency Test” designed to evaluate the competence of professional translators. Although individual examination questionnaires differ with each category, each test comprises approximately 1,000 words.

The Babel Professional Language Test (BPL Test) is administered by

the Babel Professional Language Test Administration Committee. The candidates are not restricted to the alumni of Babel University, and public participation has been widely encouraged.

As an evaluation standard for business communication proficiency, especially for translation proficiency, the above-mentioned “Translator Qualification Examination” (Honyaku-Kentei), administered by JTA with the authorization of the Ministry of Labor, would come to mind first. However, according to the information provided by the Babel representative, the JTA test examines ability in the major categories of social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities, but does not necessarily prove ability in a specific category. On the other hand, the BPL test, which is offered with greater frequency than the JTA test, has been designed to evaluate proficiency in a specific category.

As part of reforms led by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, government agencies have ceased to support the evaluation of technical translation proficiency, such as the Society for Testing English Proficiency test. In other words, the BPL Test has come to compete for *de facto* standard status with other translation proficiency tests in the same arena of “privately run tests.”

The Professional Translation Proficiency Test has two features. The first feature is “grade evaluation.” Based on test results, examinees are given grades from 1 through 5. Grade 2 proves that an examinee possesses enough knowledge and technique to work independently as a professional translator (a goal for examinees for the time being). The other feature is “skill analysis.” An assessment sheet clearly points out an examinee’s deficiencies to provide

guidance for further study after taking the test.

The eight categories of the Professional Translation Proficiency Test currently include English→Japanese translation of fiction, non-fiction, and movies (subtitles), law- and computer-related texts, as well as Japanese→English translation of patent specifications. Additional categories include French→Japanese and German→Japanese literary translation. Furthermore, the fiction category is divided into mystery and romance. Candidates usually take the test at home, but Babel Co., Ltd. recently administered its first test at a test venue to evaluate the productivity of candidates and to move toward a “practical” situation examination. Examination time was also shortened for those taking the test at home.

For further information on both JTA and Babel Co., Ltd., please contact Mr. Tomoki Hotta (hotta\_t@nifty.com).

### **Japan Translation Federation**

JTF is a nonprofit industrial organization striving to promote translation businesses through the implementation of research studies, seminars, the training of skilled persons, and participation in international conferences related to translation. Through its programs, JTF aims to contribute to the economic and social development of Japan. JTF was founded as a voluntary organization in 1981. The Honyaku Kentei (Translator Qualification Examination) was inaugurated five years later, in 1986. In 1990, JTF affiliated with FIT and became a corporate juridical entity upon obtaining the permission of the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. In 1992, JTF launched an online version of the Honyaku Kentei examination system. Finally, in 1993, JTF became affiliated with ATA. As of March 2002, JTF has

119 corporate members, 313 individual members, and 6 supporting members. JTF's activities include:

- Conducting research and studies related to the translation business;
- Organizing seminars and lectures related to the translation business;
- Fostering skilled translators and administering examinations for the evaluation of translation proficiency:
  - Honyaku Kentei (Translator Qualification Examination), and
  - Issuing guidebooks for prospective applicants and commenting on past problems;
- Collecting and provisioning information on translation businesses;
- Serving as a liaison cooperating with foreign and Japanese organizations related to translation;
- Protecting intellectual properties related to translation; and
- Issuing commendations related to translation.

### **The Honyaku Kentei (Translator Qualification Examination of JTF)**

#### *Objectives:*

1. To foster industrial translators and to maintain and improve the quality of translation, thereby contributing to the promotion of language services to the industry sectors requiring translation.
2. In order to achieve the above objectives, the following two levels shall be established:
  - a. Practical use level—designed to certify the ability of the examinee as a professional translator;
  - b. Basic level—designed to find promising future translators.

#### *Types of certification:*

1. The level and fields of specialization shall be as follows for each level:

- a. For the practical use level, the examinations shall consist of English→Japanese and Japanese→English;
  - b. For the basic level, the examinations shall consist of English→Japanese and Japanese→English.
2. For the practical use level, the fields of specialization shall be as follows: Politico-socio-economic, science and technology, finance and securities, medicine and pharmacology, information processing, and patents. For the basic level, there shall be no particular fields of specialization.

#### *Number of grades of certification:*

The number of grades shall be as follows for each level:

1. For the practical use level—from 1st grade down to 3rd grade;
2. For the basic level—4th grade and 5th grade.

#### *Qualification for taking the examination:*

There shall be absolutely no discrimination based on academic credentials, age, sex, or nationality.

#### *Management and operating organization:*

1. The examinations for certification shall be managed and operated by the Certification Committee.
2. The Certification Committee shall consist of the System Division, the Examination Paper and Marking Division, and the Operation Division.

#### *Appointment of the chairman and members:*

1. The expert members shall be men of learning and experience, or experts on the management and operation of the system.
2. The members of the Examination

Paper and Marking Division shall be translators in active service in the relevant field of specialization.

3. In principle, members shall be members of JTF. Expert members and members of the Examination Paper and Marking Division can be nonmembers.

#### *Venue of examinations:*

Tokyo, Osaka, Hiroshima, and a special venue established on the Internet.

#### *Frequency of examinations:*

The examinations shall be given twice a year, on the fourth Saturdays of February and July.

Further information on JTF can be obtained directly from Mr. Chuichi Kamei (kameitrn@jb3.so-net.ne.jp), who generously translated the information presented here and who can provide, in English, a more detailed report on JTF's activities and merits.

In the next issue, we will examine the situation in the Iberian Peninsula. As the editor of this series, I encourage readers to submit any relevant information concerning non-U.S. certification or similar programs, as well as comments on the information published in this series, to my e-mail address at [jiri@cetra.com](mailto:jiri@cetra.com).

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