

Learning on the Job : a Translator in Tokyo

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Learning on the Job: a Translator in Tokyo

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仕事を通じて学ぶ—東京在住翻訳家の経験

アーバン・コネクションズ、東京

Abstract

It was a privilege to introduce my company and job at the Research Writing Conference as an example of one part of the private sector publishing and language services industry in Japan. I have been with Urban Connections since November 2001 and a somewhat green perspective surely colours my interpretation of the place of the company in the industry. Founded in 1991 by a US citizen and translator, UC has experienced phases of high growth and sharp slowdown. This culturally Japanese yet quite cosmopolitan company is now thriving in a harsh economic environment. Stability has been provided by a government-dominated clientele, but recent growth has also been seen in private sector orders. In this article I look at the past and present activities of the company, reflect on my own development while establishing a foothold in the language services industry in Tokyo, and look at UC's prospects for the future.

「リサーチ・ライティングについての会議」で、日本における民間の出版、語学サービス産業の1事例として、弊社の活動内容を紹介できるのは、名誉なことである。私は、2001年11月よりアーバン・コネクション (UC) 社に勤務してきた。UCは、1991年に米国市民の翻訳者によって設立され、高度成長期と急激な景気後退期のいずれをも経験してきた。日本の地にありながら、きわめて国際的な弊社は、現在の厳しい経済環境のなかでも、好調な業績をあげている。弊社の顧客の多くは政府関係であるものの、近年の成長は民間企業の注文に負うところも小さくない。本稿で、私は、弊社の過去と現在の活動をふりかえりつつ、弊社が東京の語学サービス産業で足がかりを築きながら成長してきた点を熟考し、UCの今後の展望について考察する。

Overview

Urban Connections (UC) is a language services company that occupies a one-floor office in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo. It was founded in 1991 by Larry Greenberg, a New York native who remains the Chief Executive officer (CEO). In recent years, the company has had a steady annual turnover of about 400 million yen. UC has a reputation of being a government-oriented translation company, and indeed the bulk of clients are the various Tokyo-based ministries and agencies. However, the work

of the company extends well beyond this. Private sector clients are proving to be a source of some of the most exciting growth for UC, and I have been involved with one client that exemplifies this.

Corporate Development

UC started out as a simple translation company. Says CEO Larry Greenberg, “I was a freelance translator, and I hired some editors, coordinators and other translators. We expanded into other areas to meet demands from our clients and to grow as a business.” Through the nineties, this growth appeared to buck the general economic slowdown: “We grew from zero in April 1990 to a 60-person staff in 1998...We used to have many more linguistic professionals on staff including two full-time Chinese translators and one Korean translator.” One former part-timer who worked at UC in 1997-98, days before use of the internet and its super-convenient dictionaries became widespread, speaks of translators having access to the services of a dedicated kanji dictionary checker, not an unusual practice in the industry at the time perhaps, but a surprise to anyone translating currently at Urban Connections.

The year 1998 was when recession finally caught up with the company, and things needed to change. “I decided to re-organize, downscale and outsource ... Times change, and we needed to get more flexible, to use the right people when we needed them and to not waste resources when we did not need them.” Greenberg also had changes in mind for a company structure that would set it apart from most other companies. “We also used to have a dedicated sales force that went around trying to get new jobs from new clients – which is a good thing – but nowadays everyone wants lower quality for lower prices and the sales people just kept landing low-level jobs that were not interesting. Such jobs were demoralizing for people who were looking for a working environment where they could learn and grow. So, that had to change too.”

Current Workings: A Tour of the Office

The company seems to exemplify an industry that is in a state of change, but above all it is ready to adjust to maximize its ability to serve clients well. In 1998, there was a big shake-up. UC brought the number of staff to a sustainable level of 25 full and part-time workers. Office premises were also downsized, and since then the company has maintained a four-division structure.

Closest to the original work of the company are the Editorial Services Division and the International Planning Division. The work of both divisions is principally Japanese to English translation and English transcription, as well as any editing that needs to be done as part of completing these tasks, in addition to internal editing work for the other divisions. Both Japanese native speakers and English native speakers sit in these sections, which on days of high demand can accommodate 14-

16 workers, dropping back to a core of some eight full-time staff at other times. The contrast in the content of the work of these divisions is less apparent than ever as cooperation between them in the non-walled environment expands, so a merger has now integrated the divisions. The name is under consideration.

The Digital Publishing Division specializes in bilingual publishing. Many bilingual government publications are finalized after being translated at Urban Connections – the English version of the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Diplomatic Blue Book, and the annual Overseas Development Aid (ODA) reports by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are just two current examples. This division also publishes a series of works on Japanese silent film in an ongoing project involving the regular services of Japan’s only remaining professional *benshi*, or silent film narration performer, a glamorous specialty occupation in pre-war Japan.

The International Conference Division also changes size to fit demand, organizing logistics and language support for a wide range of international events around Japan and providing total support for conferences. Experience includes work at the G8 and APEC summits in Japan. In 2003 so far, the International Conference Division has organized the annual Global Youth Conference, a two-week Ministry of Foreign Affairs program that invites young intellectuals and officials from around the world to meet on a certain theme, and a Hong Kong journalist exchange. The latter involved arranging interviews with prominent people in Tokyo and coordinating interpretation support.

The Work of My Division(s)

At International Planning and Editorial Services, we deal with a large volume of work from government clients. Our strongest relationships are with ministries concerned on a daily basis with international affairs – principally the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister’s Office. Twice weekly, or more in times of particular urgency such as the recent war in Iraq, UC dispatches a stenographer to record the international press conferences given by the Prime Minister’s Deputy Press Secretary and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Recordings are rushed back to our offices to be converted into final transcripts that are sent out to Japan’s embassies and consulates around the world, and posted on the internet.

For translation, one regular annual project is the Diplomatic Blue Book mentioned earlier. This is a survey of Japanese foreign policy and concerns as well as an account of the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the English version is translated and published by Urban Connections. Other clients send work on a daily or near-daily basis. Most prominent of these is the aptly-named *Sori no Ugoki*, “What’s up around the Prime Minister?” website bulletin. On most mornings there is one entry or more to be translated into English describing the previous day’s

activities of the PM. Other work related to the PM this year has included an extensive translation of the Kantei homepage (a guided tour of the architecture and surrounds of the PM's new official residence in Tokyo). Another significant client closely related to this one is the Cabinet Office, for which we provide an English translation of the minutes of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (CEFP), a high-powered committee of ministers and private sector leaders chaired by the Prime Minister to oversee Japan's economic strategy. Occasional excitement also comes from urgent translations of Prime Minister's speeches or translations for Imperial household press conferences. The need for haste at all hours can turn this work into an excellent team-building exercise.

Most of the government translations we produce are known to be dry. This reflects extensive resort to *chokuyaku*, or direct literal translation, due to client demand or English ability. Government clients can often be relied upon to request such a translation mode, which makes it a more frustrating although less challenging exercise for the translator. The mode also depends on the specific coordinator at the ministry, and UC is always working with clients to establish the appropriate register for a translation.

Semi-public organizations and think-tanks such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI) are also major clients. UC has recently produced a large number of translations relating to cooperation between academia, industry and government. Market research and materials on small or medium-sized enterprises have featured prominently in this regard.

Market research is also a major area of translation for private clients. One of UC's major private-sector relationships is with Nissan. This Tokyo-based carmaker adopted English as its official language after forming an alliance with Renault in 1999 and appointing the French-Brazilian Carlos Ghosn as leader. Nissan's Communications Department, established and overseen directly by Mr. Ghosn himself, requires translations of its summaries of each day's Japanese newspaper articles. This daily domestic-market media survey must be delivered by 3pm every day. We also create a daily summary of Nissan-related news stories on the internet from all over the world. Another major client group is represented by specialist market research companies, for which translations this year have included public surveys on Marlboro advertising, wine labels and "can coffee".

Other private sector clients include the Japan Football Association, which typically requires translation into Japanese of English documents from the FIFA head office in Geneva requiring translation to Japanese, or urgent translation of letters from Italian to Japanese relating to a Japanese soccer player in Italy. For a welcome change of pace, we are greeted from time to time with a request to translate old-time Japanese folk tales for a Kyoto University web archive.

How We Work

The major strength of UC is its work as a translating company dealing with Japanese and English. All Japanese to English translation, and all transcriptions in either language, are completed in-house. Very rarely, if a translation job comes late on Friday and is due on Monday, and there are no translators left in the office, the job will go to a freelance translator to complete on the weekend. UC deals with all languages, however. It possesses a database of some 200 translators and interpreters, arranged by language, translation direction, field of expertise and priority based on UC's assessment of the quality of their work. Chinese is all outsourced to one company, Nichu Joho Center, other languages to UC's priority translators, and as a last resort UC will tap the resources of other translation agencies. The job of coordinating used to be a specialty position in each division. This responsibility is now spread among translators who are proficient in spoken Japanese, giving them a wider range of tasks daily as part of a strategy to broaden the skills of all employees.

The bias toward Japanese to English translation is fairly simply explained. There is a high demand for the service, and compared to English to Japanese translation, there are fewer capable translators and thus a higher market price. In UC's case, rates currently range from 4,500 yen per page (200 words English) for long-term or high volume contracts, or for clients who will accept more flexible deadlines; this figure will rise to perhaps 7,500 yen per page for clients with greater demands. Rates for English to Japanese are less, averaging 4,000 - 5,000 yen per page (400 characters Japanese), based on the same conditions. For other languages, fairly common orders such as French, Spanish, or Italian will attract a charge roughly 1,000 yen higher than the Japanese-English rate, and less common requests such as Greek or Russian are priced on a case-by-case basis.

UC has built up a stellar client list after more than 14 years in the business. Our workflow is maintained by a sustained high level of service, word of mouth, and through the UC website. These are the most obvious sales strategies, following elimination of the sales force five years ago.

Recruitment

Recruitment at UC takes a variety of forms. The company web page has become important to recruiting as well as sales, and new job applicants are essentially asked to follow the instructions provided by the site. Other important means are advertising through the Japan Times on Mondays and the introduction of friends by current employees.

A significant feature of UC's personnel policy is the relatively high use of interns. Internships are not, according to CEO Greenberg, primarily for recruitment, "but that is a possibility and an actuality." The company began to experiment with the concept some five years ago, when UC started getting applications from US

students in search of a good experience in Japan over the summer. Greenberg tried it, it was good and it went from there. "It is working very well – lots of good people coming in and some of them having great experiences and leaving...and then others who decide and we decide that they should stay." The success of the internship program as a recruitment tool appears to be due to the freedom it offers to both UC and intern. "Compared to other forms of recruiting, it is low commitment on both sides so we can just try anyone we like and they can try us."

My Experience at UC

Leaving the Japan English Teaching (JET) program in search of a job more befitting of my qualifications in 2001, I happened upon Urban Connections through the job pages of the Japan Times. Positions were advertised for both translators and editors. I lacked the confidence to put my Japanese skills on the line as a translator after just three years of studying the language at university, and a further year of unofficial study during my year on JET, so I applied as an editor. After six months of part-time work during which I honed my skills as both an editor and transcription expert – how many hours of conferences did I type up? – I was thrown a translation to see how I would handle it. This was gratifying, after all those Saturdays of Japanese lessons and having by now faced hundreds of pages of strange Japanese-like English that seemed to defy editing. It was obvious to anyone that my Japanese comprehension needed work, but with the incredible training provided by translating Council of Economic and Fiscal Policy meeting minutes and the constant feedback provided by more senior Japanese checkers and Larry Greenberg, this improved. Of course, I continued to edit and transcribe when necessary.

After four months, I was advised I would become apprentice to the departing Nissan *tanto*, coordinator. The automotive industry was a new world to me, but once again the constant feedback did wonders and after two months I became fully responsible for Nissan. As soon as I had gone to Nissan headquarters together with the former coordinator and Mr. Greenberg and completed the formalities of a meeting with our opposite numbers at the Communications Department, I was on my own to translate the daily Nissan Headline Monitor. Without warning, the volume of daily newspaper translation required by 3pm every day doubled and tripled. The sudden demand overloaded my capabilities and finally, the Nissan liaison called me on the telephone to demand what was going on – it was a somewhat traumatic call that at one point involved shouting. I privately cursed Japanese businessmen then but from that day on, we made sure that the translations were ready by 3pm and that I had sufficient help to ensure this. The increase in volume from Nissan was a great source of satisfaction, and there was an increase in other translations from the company as well.

Since the new financial year, I have taken on two more clients, whose

requirements for translations other than Japanese to English have demanded that I upgrade my Japanese telephone skills to coordinate translators and clients.

While my progress at the firm has not exactly been steady, I have been able to improve my own skills and position rapidly, partly because of the size of the operation and partly because the top translators devote plenty of attention to training. For me too, it is a fairly dynamic environment because of the orientation to current events. The build-up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 warranted a closed-door briefing from the CEO on what might be required of us when war broke out in terms of an increased number of press conferences. The possibility of high-profile call-outs to conferences down the street, in Kyoto or in Mexico, is another factor in making UC an exciting place to work in.

The small size of the firm does present some difficulties. Having an open-plan office means that personalities become amplified, and when I first arrived I was evidently seen by my fellow employees as a rather brash foreigner likely to “make trouble.” Through trustworthy advice I was able to come to terms with this unexpected perception and make some changes that allowed me to adjust better to what was effectively a very Japanese work environment – obviously one requiring some restraint due to the nature of the work and the concentration required for tasks such as editing and translation. I am sure that a better grasp of honorific Japanese and its appropriate use would also have helped to blunt the kind of perceptions that I seemed to foster.

Conclusions and Prospects

All in all, my experience supports the contention of Larry Greenberg that UC is unique for a number of reasons. “This is the only real translation company that I know of anywhere in the world that is truly a corporation with structures, organizations, professional policies, a client list to die for – and a CEO who was and is a translator.” The last is an absolutely key point: “It means that top management fully understands quality control, productivity and the basic details of what individual translators are doing. That makes UC a very fast, and very nurturing environment for people to come into and gain essential skills and learn and grow.” This, he says, applies as much to conference organization or publishing as it does to translation, transcription or editing, because “the people who are managing those things...worked their way up through the processes and still do real work everyday.”

As a postscript, Urban Connections looks headed for genuine revival, and may show its first profit in some time for the current financial year, thanks to the stability of the official Tokyo clientele, and some new projects and growth in private sector orders. It seems likely that our main areas of work will remain in government and business communications.

The Conference on Research Writing focused on the language and publishing

services in Japan and how they relate or could relate to academia in this country. In the short term, the more pure aspects of translation or publishing in the academic research community remain largely unknown and out of reach for Urban Connections. Yet with a steady stream of translation jobs coming from universities through a third party liaison (the most obvious instance being translation of traditional tales for the Kyoto University Library website), gradual expansion into this area could be a reasonable proposition - gradual because UC is familiar with only a relatively small pool of academics, and still lacks the resume with which to sell its services in the research community. In any case, the barriers are not major, as good translators will do a good job on any document once they are familiar with the vocabulary.

For any approach to the academic market, the major issue is that UC is a commercial company, paying market salaries to its translators and charging market fees for services that cannot be negotiated down past a certain point. Academics are unlikely to cope with the financial impact of using our services on their own, so without support from universities or government institutions for translating Japanese into English and other world languages, the services of UC, and its capacity to call on a wide range of high-quality translation and editing resources at any time, will remain out of reach for the vast majority of researchers. Everyone at UC has a university background, so I am sure I speak for everyone at the company when I say I hope the twain will meet, and soon.

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