

Research Writing in Japan : the Bottleneck and Imperatives for a Conference Series

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Research Writing in Japan: the Bottleneck and Imperatives for a Conference Series

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日本におけるリサーチ・ライティング：障害と課題

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Abstract

In this paper the aims and context of the 2003 conference on research writing in Japan are reviewed. It is suggested that research writing – in any language and country – represents a bottleneck in the research process. The reasons for this are to some extent social and cultural, and do not simply reflect the abilities of individual researchers. Recommendations for a possible future conference series are presented.

本稿は、日本におけるリサーチ・ライティングについての2003年会議の目的と背景を省みたものである。リサーチ・ライティングは、どの言語であろうと、どこの国であろうと、研究活動の障害のひとつ (bottleneck) であることを示唆し、その理由として、ある程度、社会的および文化的なものであり、個々の研究者の能力をありのままに反映しているのではないことを指摘した。そして、今後予定される一連の会議に対する推奨事項を掲げた。

The 2003 Conference on Research Writing in Japan

For most serious writers, including those who do academic or scientific research, writing is a never-ending struggle. While some writers may prefer to work in isolation, in most research disciplines and in most geographical areas, formal and informal research communities exist and are able to help research writers in various ways. The young researcher who is perhaps hoping to continue doing research can often find more experienced people who are able and willing to offer advice about writing. For any particular piece of research by a student, the advice needed is not necessarily that provided by the student's supervisors. There are also opportunities, through personal connections and through the Internet, to find other researchers, or other students, or non-researchers who can help with editing and/or translation, for research written in a first or second language.

Among established researchers, draft papers may be read for others voluntarily, as part of a mutually beneficial exchange of help. In many research communities, such mutual help is viewed as a professional responsibility. Occasionally the help

needed and sought is a professional service that must be paid for. A great variety of language services are available in Japan, and internationally, but knowing exactly what to look for and where to look can be difficult for many Japanese researchers. The aims of the 2003 conference on research writing (hereafter, 'the Osaka conference') were therefore to:

- (i) bring together the many kinds of people involved in research writing, from inside and outside research institutions,
- (ii) to survey the existing culture and methods of research teaching, writing, and publication in Japan, and
- (iii) to discuss how communications between writers, editors, and translators can be improved.

These were large aims, beyond the reach of a small gathering lasting just two days, but the conference did succeed in generating intensive discussion of the many problems faced by university students, teachers, research writers, editors, and translators in Japan. By taking a broad anthropological approach to the situation in this country, it was possible to integrate or make coherent many different points of view within one small meeting.

The Osaka conference may have been the first attempt to look broadly at research writing in Japan, with such mixed participation. In the future it is hoped that similar conferences can be held, in different locations, and with different organisers. With more than one conference, it would be possible to explore themes and language areas not covered in the first conference and the present volume. Participation by a wide range of Japanese researchers and organisations would be desirable, since the conferences would be primarily for their benefit. The question of whether further conferences can be held will be considered later.

Conference Challenges

The challenges for Osaka conference were numerous. We had to speak across a linguistic divide, and possibly a more general cultural divide. We also had to speak across generations, or age cohorts. The problems and opportunities experienced by students and young researchers today are not the same as those experienced in the past, and it was considered important to have current graduate students represented at the conference. Funding for students as conference speakers is not readily obtained, as most funding for research gatherings is intended for established researchers. For our conference, the situation was managed administratively by noting the previous professional qualifications of the students involved.

How important are cultural differences in research or science?¹⁾ Despite various

historical claims concerning the geographical origins of science, I personally believe that all human beings are scientific to some extent, and that no society or region can claim to be the primary source of a research culture. We have all been human for a very long time (Wells 2002), and the intellectual origins of science may predate all recognised records of scientific activity. More recently, within the recorded history of the last several centuries, there have been many intercontinental exchanges of science and technology.

Thus, through shared origins, and also through exchange between societies, there may be more basic similarities than differences among research cultures in different parts of the world. Modern science is often assumed to be “Western science”, but “Western” is often either too narrowly defined as European, or is so broadly defined that it has no meaning as a geographical term, and little meaning as a cultural term.

In fact, any attempt to generalise about “modern science” in its entirety may be misleading. With regard to intellectual and practical habits, the cultural differences between research disciplines within any one society might be greater than the differences between the same or similar disciplines in different societies. As far as their work is concerned, medical researchers in Japan today, for example, are likely to have more in common with medical researchers in Britain, India or China than with scholars of literature in Japan.

Is it useful to debate these issues? I hope so. The themes suggested for the Osaka conference were not unique to Japan. The focus was research writing in Japan, but what we learned – during the course of the conference - was significant for research in many countries.

Research Writing Communities

A model for the social context of research writing communities is shown in Figure 1. The interactions vary from place to place, and time to time, but something like this structure may apply to research writing communities generally, around the world. The main points to be noted here are: (i) there is a major division between public and private research, and it is suggested that professional language services are more closely aligned with businesses and commercial research than with public education and research, (ii) recruitment between different groups is not entirely unidirectional and age based, (iii) the activities of individuals in each area can overlap, and (iv) research does not occur in complete isolation from society generally.

In Japan and elsewhere, and despite the interactions indicated in Figure 1, there is a lack of contact between the people offering language services (professional editors and translators), and researchers. The main reasons for this may be that professional editors and translators can often find better pay or more work in the

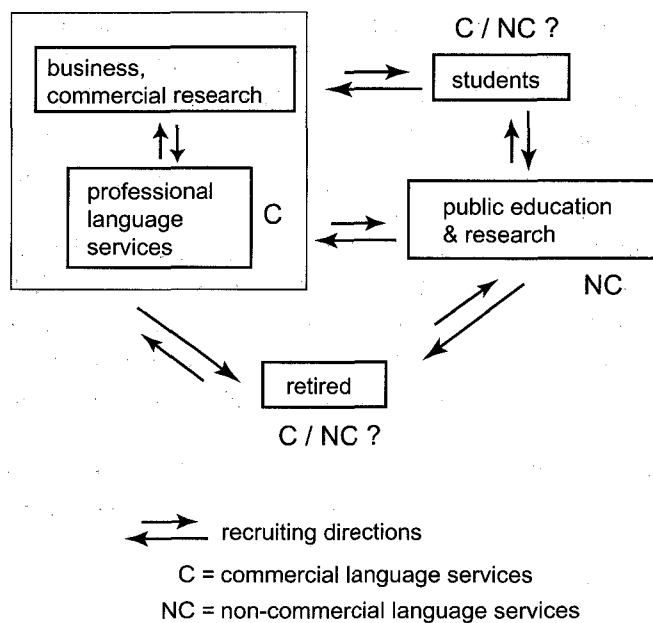


Fig. 1 Research writing communities (public and commercial), and their interactions (recruiting directions) with students, professional language services, and retirees.

business world, and that researchers are often not able or willing to pay professional editors and translators for help. There is an international tendency for researchers to depend on personal connections to get help from friends and colleagues. This interdependence is generally viewed as a legitimate attempt to build personal networks and contribute actively to intellectual discourse within research communities. This interdependence is not wrong, in any practical or ethical sense, but it does impose limitations on the communication of research. If research communities become too closed and self-sustaining, in their social interactions, then they can become objects of suspicion in society generally, and in relationships between different countries.

Exactly how research writers, editors and translators interact, as individuals, as members of research communities, and as members of wider society, is a process that depends on many cultural variables. For writers to develop effective working relationships with editors and translators outside the immediate research community, many different social and cultural factors may be involved in different countries. Such relationships, or lack of them, may reflect not just differences in person-to-person interactions but also differences in the administration of research in different countries, and the allocation of funds for writing and publication.

Are the administrative structures of research institutions less culture-bound and

easier to change than the habits of individuals involved in research? I am not sure if there is any easy answer. Although the question was raised at the Osaka conference, it is not one that participants chose to consider. To attempt an answer would require discussion of the entire history of education reform in Japan, a huge topic that was beyond the scope of a small gathering of mainly foreign residents in this country.

The Research Bottleneck

The session themes on the first day of the Osaka conference were “*A Research Bottleneck?*”, followed by “*Publish AND Perish?*” – a rephrasing of the overused demand to “publish or perish”. The latter is often used as a stick to beat students, unconfident young researchers, and lagging older researchers. The above rephrasing may sound even more depressing. It suggests that there is no hope: even if you publish, you may perish. However, the aim of the present author, as organiser of the conference, was not to discourage all efforts to write and publish. The aim was to challenge the ideas behind the figure of speech, and to encourage writing that is worthwhile as a part of doing research, regardless of the uncertain future of the writer.

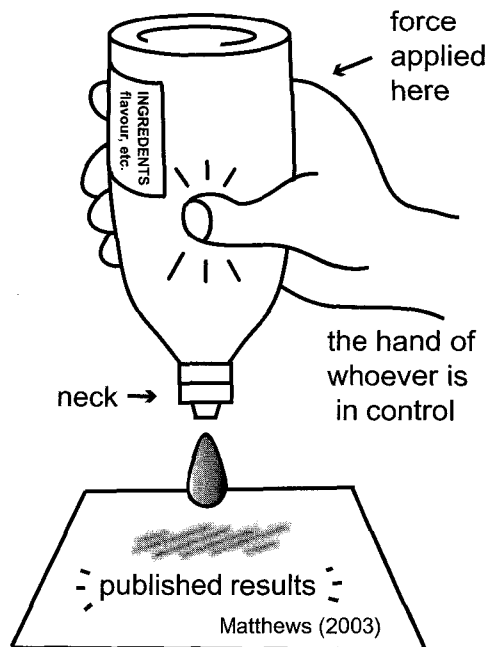


Fig. 2 The research bottleneck (ketchup model).

What is the research bottleneck? The metaphor of a bottleneck implies a severe constriction and possibly also a process of sorting-out or selection. Between the doing and publishing of research, the process of writing can be seen as a bottleneck (Figure 2) – for research in any language, and in any country. The need to acquire writing skills may be largely responsible for this bottleneck, but other factors are also involved, namely time, money, and language barriers.

The bottleneck in skills

For many researchers, writing reports for publication is the most difficult part of their work, regardless of what language is used. For research students, having or not having the ability to write well can make or break the chances of finding work in many academic and non-academic situations, after graduation.

Mysteriously, writing is an aspect of research life that is hardly ever taught in a systematic manner. Much depends on whether research students are lucky enough - or determined enough - to find research projects that are stimulating, and supervisors, co-authors, or referees (reviewers) who are good writers and editors. The transmission of research writing skills is a complex problem that cannot be solved by simply offering formulas for the construction of research papers (Canagarajah 2002).

Time constraints

As researchers gain experience in writing, they usually also develop a backlog of potentially publishable research from which they extract material as circumstances permit or require. Over one working life, another kind of bottleneck may develop (Figure 3). My conjecture here is that for the hypothetical average researcher, the greatest need to publish comes when the least amount of material is on hand, and the most amount of time is available. Conversely, the least need to publish comes when a researcher succeeds in finding secure employment, and has – potentially – more to write about, but less time for writing, because of commitments to administration, teaching, fund-raising, and family.

Financial constraints

In Japan, as in other countries, financial support for research varies enormously across different institutions and research fields, and from academic to commercial areas of research. Internationally, there seems to be a general silence on the costs of publishing research. I doubt that there is any funding system in which all the costs, or possible costs, of writing and publishing research have been recognised.

Perhaps it is generally assumed – by funding agencies - that only researchers need to be involved in the writing process, despite the ethical requirements for peer review, and the widely recognised benefits of having manuscripts read by others

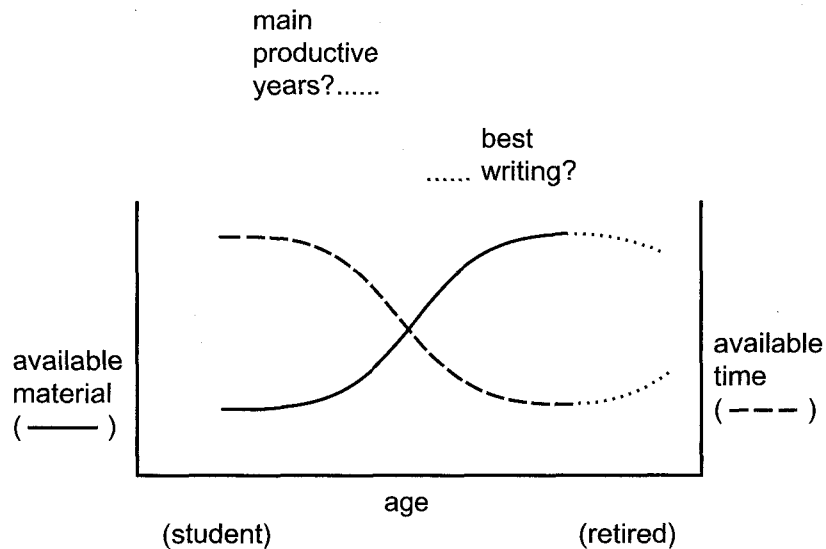


Fig. 3 An average working life? Changes in the amount of unpublished research material on hand, and the time available for research writing (hypothetical scheme).

before publication. As a result, researchers must either pay for assistance personally, or use their own time as much as possible, or use and reciprocate the volunteer services of friends and colleagues, if they can be found.

Reciprocal and voluntary readings of draft manuscripts are very important for an active and intellectually stimulating research culture, among graduate students and qualified researchers. I do not wish to suggest monetary values for these activities, or promote money-orientated approaches for this aspect of research. Nevertheless, there are many situations in which it is necessary or useful to pay for editing and translation services.

The proportion of funding allocated to writing and publishing is generally very small compared to the overall cost of doing the research (Figure 4). In Japan, support for locally-distributed publications is apparent in most research institutions (see Eades, this volume) and financial support can also be obtained through grants offered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, or *Monkasho*). Nevertheless, the amount spent on research writing and publishing probably bears little relation to the improvement in value - economic and intellectual - that might result from giving more support for the writing process, and for the training of new research writers.

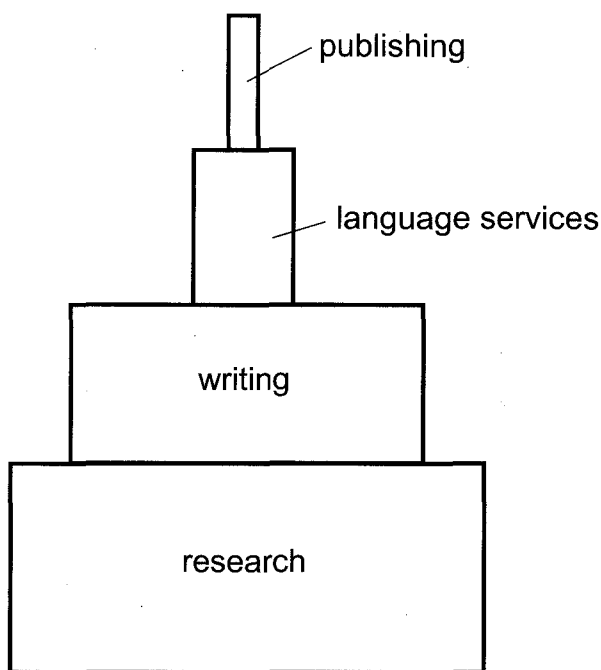


Fig.4 Spending for research, writing, language services, and publishing: a socio-ecological food pyramid? Most of the spending that leads to a research publication may be absorbed by research activities and the salary of a researcher while he or she is writing (hypothetical scheme).

From the author's own observations at a variety of research institutions in Japan, it seems that much money is spent on the physical production of publications, and relatively little on the employment of people with the skills required to provide the content of those publications, through writing, editing, translation, illustration, photography, layout design and so on. As a result, large print runs of unread research can be seen languishing in the corridors and backrooms of many institutions in Japan – more attention is also needed to improve distribution systems for the many existing stockpiles of already published research.

The fact that many research publications are distributed for free, without even a nominal charge to cover distribution costs, limits the distribution options for many institutions. The Internet now offers many novel possibilities for reaching potential readers and distributing journal back issues and old stocks of books. For greater efficiency, and perhaps in an all-inclusive manner, such efforts could be centralised across many institutions and disciplines.

Language barriers

During the last several years in Japan I have been associated with Japanese

researchers in the natural and social sciences at various institutions. For many of them, writing in English or other languages is a huge struggle, an unavoidable barrier to reaching academic audiences outside Japan. The research bottleneck is more severe for them than for those of us who can happily write and publish in just one language. Although Eades (this volume) has noted that Japanese researchers can be disappointed by their experience of publishing abroad, wider communication with academic and other audiences world-wide can make the struggle worthwhile for individual research writers. Unless benefits are experienced at the individual level, institutional efforts to promote international publishing will never have much success. With over one hundred million speakers, Japanese is not a minor language, and for many Japanese researchers the local audience is large enough.

For foreign scholars working in Japan, or approaching Japan from abroad, there can also be benefits from publishing in Japanese. The diversity of research in this country is great, and publishing in Japanese is a good way to discover new areas of thought and information, and to build working relationships with colleagues in related fields in Japan.

Personally, I believe that no language – no matter how small the speaking community - should be entirely disregarded as a target language for publishing research. If the resources of time, skills and money are available, then aim of wider communication can embrace a greater diversity of target languages, rather than just one or two numerically dominant languages. This is true for individual researchers, and also for entire institutions, research communities, and countries.

Publish *and* Perish?

Only a small fraction of students can become, or want to become, academic researchers. There is neither room, nor need, for all graduates to become researchers, no matter how brilliant they are academically. There is every need for educated people to be active in all areas of society. An academic life is not the only legitimate or worthwhile goal for training in research – yet academic goals do dominate at universities, in Japan and elsewhere. Of course, introducing young people to research as a source of new knowledge is one of the necessary and defining characteristics of universities, but this does not mean that research has to be given more status than say, the responsible application of existing knowledge in society generally.

Perversely, if a student does want to do research, there is always the challenge of “publish or perish.” This at least is the case in many countries outside Japan. It is hard to see this challenge as encouraging. If students do not publish, they will not perish as human beings worthy of respect. If they do publish, and their research and writing are weak, or worse, then they may lose respect *and* perish academically. It is also possible that there are no job positions in a particular field, when and where

needed, so young researchers may ‘perish’ again, no matter how good their publications are.

What I am trying to say is that we should separate the ideas of publishing and perishing. There is a connection, but so what? We do have to publish, if we want to do research and get paid – but that is all. The idea that we may perish for not publishing of is not a law of nature, and is not a law of society in general. The wider society of which all researchers are a part provides us with many alternatives. Not everyone needs to be a writer, and not all research is worth publishing. We should only publish when we really want to say something, and have an audience we want to reach (no matter how distant or hypothetical that audience may be in time and space).

If the funding system demands quantity rather than quality, we should change or at least resist the system, and provide quality. I see no point in being cynical, and every point in being idealistic about this. Without a larger purpose beyond self-promotion, and an audience wider than that of what seem to be potential employers, self-preservation is unlikely to follow.

If we write as well as we can, and look for ways to improve our writing, and have concern for our readers, then maybe we can earn our place in the world, as researchers, and as writers. This is an ethical view that supports social engagement. Others might like to imagine that research is best conducted without social engagement, but this has the unethical result of abrogating all responsibility for the possible uses of freely-distributed new knowledge, or for the actions of organisations that employ researchers and control the use of their results.

Ethics and Politics in Research and Research Writing

By writing for a purpose that is larger than self-preservation, there should be a better chance of doing some kind of good, and a better chance that society in general will see research as worth supporting. This may ultimately lead to a wider support base for research, and a wider range of employment possibilities for individual researchers. The alternative is increasing dependence on narrow and powerful vested interests that support – through public lobbying and private spending - a shrinking spectrum of research.

A socially-engaged ethical stance may meet with approval, or encourage trust, even if the research is only partly understood by non-specialist audiences. An ethical stance does not necessarily mean falling into line with the political directions of society at any given moment. In healthy social-scientific relationships, society and science can look to each other for both dissent and confirmation, while maintaining mutual respect.

In every society, and in every research discipline, there is a valued history and culture, and the research is not something that can be moved instantly in a particular

direction by external forces, but it can be moved.

Research and research writing are inherently social and cultural activities, and the pressures of society and politics cannot or should not be ignored.

In Japan at present, these are critical issues. In the next financial year, the government will begin a massive deregulation of public institutions that carry out research. Apparently, all ninety-nine of Japan's national universities will become self-governing entities in fiscal 2004, with greater autonomy in hiring and budgets, and in teaching and research (Goodman 2003).

Imperatives for a Conference Series

The National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka - host for the 2003 conference on research writing in Japan - will be affected by educational reforms along with many other public research institutions. A slow withdrawal of funding is likely at the museum, and elsewhere, and there will be pressure to use the remaining funds more effectively, according to criteria that are yet to be established. The reforms will only have positive consequences – for research and education – if the institutions affected are given sufficient freedom to develop new ways of working, and are able to develop new ways that do not undermine the basic reasons for their existence. In the process of change, there are both opportunities and dangers. Ideally, the educational reforms will allow institutions to employ technical and other staff in new ways that help researchers use their time more effectively, for research, teaching and writing.

Educational reforms will also affect how Japan is perceived as a potential destination for study and work, by students and researchers abroad. If Japan continues to attract foreign students and researchers, and wishes them to contribute effectively to research in Japan and internationally, then Canagarajah's (2002) review of how academic writing is taught to multilingual students may have increasing practical significance here, even though the review refers to English as a dominant language rather than Japanese.

For independent editors and translators, and for language service companies, there are also likely to be more opportunities to assist research institutions in Japan.

The opportunities may also extend to individuals and companies located abroad, if they are able to establish good working relationships with research writers and institutions in Japan, despite the barriers of distance (c.f. Goel and Baliga, this volume).

During preparations for the Osaka conference, the folklorist Hasan El-Shamy (pers. comm. 2003) informed me that such a gathering can be classified as a sub-genre of folk narrative, under the titles of "memorates" and "labor reminiscences." These labels proved to be entirely fitting. During the formal and informal discussions,

memories and work experiences were freely shared and explored. Between the academic research community and those involved in language services, many points of common interest were discovered. However, in the course of one short conference, it was not possible to cover all points of interest, or to bring together all those who might have been able to represent the views of students, teachers, researchers, research organisations, publishers, language communities, and language services in Japan. Strong support was expressed for holding similar conferences in the future.

In this paper I have suggested that the difficulties faced in research writing constitute a major bottleneck in the research process. The reasons for this bottleneck are to some extent social and cultural, and do not simply reflect the personal abilities of individual researchers. It was thus appropriate that the first conference on this subject was held at an institution devoted to ethnological and anthropological research. However, this does not mean that future conferences on research writing should also be held under the umbrella of anthropology. It might be more interesting academically, and more useful socially, to develop a series of related conferences that move from one venue to another, with new organisers each time, and focussing on different issues within the larger theme of research writing in Japan. The present circumstances of research in Japan suggest many imperatives for such a conference series.

As a major trading nation and investor in public and private research, Japan supports research in many countries, not just in Japan. From within Japan, there is much research that could be communicated more effectively, and more widely, with the efforts of writers, editors and translators inside and outside the country (that is, by push and by pull). The academic, social, and cultural circumstances of research writing in Japan are thus matters of international concern, for practical and academic reasons.

The Osaka conference was only able to support attendance by people already present in Japan. In the future, and especially to explore issues related to international communication and the use of multiple research languages, it would be useful if participants could be invited from inside and outside Japan. A series of conferences would be needed to comfortably accommodate representatives of multiple research disciplines, major research languages such as Spanish and Chinese, and a range of minor research languages.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Roger Goodman for his comments on a draft of this paper, and free-ranging observations on research and education in Japan and elsewhere.

Notes

- 1) I use the terms “research” and “science” interchangeably here, though not all people who do research accept “science” as their job description.

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