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### Article abstract

The status of interpreters and translators depends on the society in which they belong. Such factors as whether the society is multilingual, monolingual as well as its international standing all impact their status and consequently financial compensation. A brief overview of the history of the status of Korean interpreters reveals that, in the past, they enjoyed middle class status and, at times, even great wealth. The social importance of translators, on the other hand, was negligible—a situation which was aggravated by the fact that readers were not very demanding. During the modern era, and especially with increased foreign trade in the 1980's, however, such tolerance was no longer the norm. There is still great interest among the general public in interpretation, especially since speaking English fluently is considered an asset in any profession in Korea. Conference interpreters, as such, are considered to be “master” English speakers. While they are envied their fluent mastery of foreign languages, interpretation, as such, is not considered a profession in which one should devote one's life. In the case of translation, though there are many translators, they are held in even lower esteem than interpreters because of the relatively low pay.

# The Status of Translators and Interpreters in Korea

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le statut des interprètes et traducteurs dépend de la société à laquelle ils appartiennent. Certains facteurs ont un impact sur leur statut, par exemple si la société est monolingue ou plurilingue, son importance au plan international. L'histoire du statut des interprètes coréens montre que dans le passé, ils possédaient le statut de classe moyenne.

D'autre part, l'importance sociale des traducteurs était négligeable. Cette situation était aggravée par la faible demande des lecteurs. Cependant, durant l'ère moderne, grâce à l'accroissement du commerce extérieur dans les années 1980, la situation a changé.

Il existe toujours un intérêt du grand public pour l'interprétation, particulièrement depuis que la connaissance de l'anglais est nécessaire sur le marché du travail en Corée. On considère les interprètes de conférence comme étant des «maîtres» de l'anglais. L'interprétation n'est pas une profession dans laquelle on doit consacrer sa vie, même si on envie les interprètes pour leur grande maîtrise des langues étrangères. Dans le cas de la traduction, même si les traducteurs sont en grand nombre, ils sont moins bien vus que les interprètes, à cause de leur salaire relativement bas.

## ABSTRACT

The status of interpreters and translators depends on the society in which they belong. Such factors as whether the society is multilingual, monolingual as well as its international standing all impact their status and consequently financial compensation. A brief overview of the history of the status of Korean interpreters reveals that, in the past, they enjoyed middle class status and, at times, even great wealth.

The social importance of translators, on the other hand, was negligible—a situation which was aggravated by the fact that readers were not very demanding. During the modern era, and especially with increased foreign trade in the 1980's, however, such tolerance was no longer the norm.

There is still great interest among the general public in interpretation, especially since speaking English fluently is considered an asset in any profession in Korea. Conference interpreters, as such, are considered to be “master” English speakers. While they are envied their fluent mastery of foreign languages, interpretation, as such, is not considered a profession in which one should devote one's life. In the case of translation, though there are many translators, they are held in even lower esteem than interpreters because of the relatively low pay.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

remuneration, comparison (between Korean and Japan), curriculum, history

The status of any profession is determined by its place in a given society and the extent to which the members of that profession can easily be replaced. For example, a society needs janitors, and nobody will deny that they are indispensable. However, since it is relatively easy to obtain the requisite skills, janitors are easily replaceable

and their social status is relatively low. On the other hand, doctors are not only important to society, but their required skills are difficult to obtain. Because they are not easily replaced, their social status is very high. Then what is the social importance of translators and interpreters and are they easily replaceable? There is no simple answer to this question. The status of translators and interpreters depends on the society to which they belong. In multilingual societies such as Switzerland and Canada, translation and interpretation are established professions that have long been recognized by society.

On the other hand, the profession in countries such as the United States and South Korea, does not enjoy high recognition. What is more, the two countries differ as to the nature of the little recognition that they do receive. While both countries are monolingual, the status of translators and interpreters is influenced by the status of each country in the international community. For example, in the United States, a superpower which expects other nations to speak English, the status of translators and interpreters is relatively low. Yet, Korea, a developing country, needs translation-interpretation professionals who can help the country to accurately absorb information from abroad and to express itself, so that the international community can learn about it. Basically, the status of translators and interpreters is a result of the law of supply and demand, and although Korean translators and interpreters do not receive the recognition they deserve or desire, at least they receive more than their U.S. counterparts.

Differences in remuneration also reflect this trend. Since in the United States, there is comparatively less demand for translators and interpreters than in Korea, translation and interpretation fees are lower in the U.S., for example, about \$400-500 per day for interpretation, as compared to Korea, about \$600-650. In the case of Europe, considered a multilingual society as far as interpretation and translation are concerned, the rates for Western languages are similar, while those for "exotic" languages such as Korean, Japanese and Chinese tend to be higher. In the late seventies and early eighties, French-into-Korean translation fees were triple the average rate among Western languages because of the scarcity of Korean translators based in France. Today, with a larger supply of translators, the rate has dropped to about 130-140% of translation fees for Western languages.

### **I. The Status of Translators and Interpreters in Korea**

Before examining the status of translators, it would be of interest to briefly study the status of interpreters. Though it is generally thought that the status of interpreters in Korea was relatively low, a recently-televised Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) documentary, "*History Special*," aimed at dispelling historical myths and misconceptions, shows that the opposite was true. The July 8, 2000 program focused on interpreters during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), pointing out that the profession did not have a lowly status and that in fact, members belonged to the middle class and were often extremely wealthy. They were not only interpreters, but were often also responsible for managing and directing the numerous diplomatic missions to China and Japan.

The positions were so coveted that fathers trained their sons and even grandsons to become interpreters, by hiring foreign live-in tutors. But the ultimate goal was to

send their sons to a foreign language institution that specialized in training interpreters in one or more of the three major foreign languages: Chinese, Japanese and Mongol. Candidates had to come highly recommended from practicing interpreters, with the recommendation and lineage often determining entrance to this prestigious institution, *Sayukwon*, which was established in 1393 and existed for five hundred years.

Training was unique in that it focused on the *spoken* language. The textbooks used depicted all the procedures and different situations that would be encountered while trading horses, ginseng and cloth, as well as how to find lodging, order food and other necessary information while traveling. It is also interesting to note that wooden blocks used to print the textbooks, were updated and “corrected” from time to time to make adjustments for changes in current usage. Students were required to live in the dormitory and study all day long. On the second and the 26th of each month there was a test and every three months, a comprehensive exam was conducted.

The interpreters were not paid a salary, *per se*, but were granted royal authorization to conduct trade on their trips abroad. When one considers that it took at least six months to travel to China or Japan and that people rarely traveled, such authority was far greater compensation than a simple flat salary. As such, they became extremely wealthy, a fact that later led them to question their middle-class status.

The experience for translators was somewhat different. For a long time, Korea limited its contacts to an area in what is today China, Japan and Mongolia, hence its nickname, the “Hermit Kingdom.” At that time, the social importance of translators was negligible. Moreover, despite their small number, translators were not in high demand and were, therefore, not held in high esteem, a situation that continued into the 20th century.

The monolingual status of Korea shifted at the dawn of the century with the advent of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), with numerous Koreans writing and speaking Japanese. Then, following liberation, the American influence increased, likewise increasing the number of Koreans who could write and speak English (although fewer than Japanese). Nevertheless, expectations for accuracy and native-like translation, particularly regarding the ability to translate from and into English, was far lower than today’s levels. In fact, translation was considered a pastime for intellectuals, and when readers encountered a slipshod translation, they generously assumed that the original had been written in obtuse language.

These conditions continued for much of the 20th century. However, starting from the late 1980’s when foreign trade increased dramatically, other international exchanges also gained momentum. As the number of Koreans who could read, write and speak foreign languages fluently increased, the tolerance level for unprofessional translations plummeted. On the one hand, there was stinging criticism from the media, in particular, against low-quality translations and the general tolerance toward them. On the other, the overall enhanced wealth of the country boosted client demand for better quality translations. Translating was no longer a hobby for intellectuals, and competent translators who were interested in becoming professionals started to make their presence felt in the market. Some translators became almost as famous as the best-selling authors for whom they were translating. As society’s perception of “freelance” professions took a turn for the better, a veritable boom occurred, with students naming translating/interpreting as their career of choice in the 1990’s.

This is not to say that the situation is now completely satisfactory. In fact, a recent article in the Korea Herald (February 6, 2001) entitled "Readers revolt against sloppy translations" bemoaned the "state of translating foreign works into the Korean language." It cited the example of a 380 million won (a little over \$380,000) investment over a six-year period to translate a 25-volume series of Dostoevsky novels last year. Despite the involvement of six professors in the translation process, numerous readers expressed their discontent with the quality of the translation.

The article went on to quote a "survey of 68 established translators," focused on studying the problems facing the local publishing industry. The biggest problem as perceived by the translators was that publishers chose books for translation according to superficial criteria, such as how well they would fare in their home markets. Another problem is that publishers make unrealistic demands on translators in order to get the translations on the market in the shortest time possible, naturally resulting in poor-quality translations. A third problem is the fee structure, that is, a set fee of approximately 1.5 million won (about US\$1,200) for a book of 250-300 pages, or 1-1.5 percent of the sales.

Now that the frenzy has calmed down somewhat, what will the impact of that piqued interest have, if any, on the status of translators? Compared to what it was, the status has greatly improved, but it still falls short of the ideal level. Except for a handful of "star" translators, the overwhelming majority are unknowns burning the midnight oil, barely eking out a living on the low translation fees that they earn. Translators say that with such low rates, it is impossible to improve the quality of translation, while clients insist that they should not, and will not, pay more for such low-quality translations. While this vicious circle will not be easily broken, a study of what came before could lead to changes in the future. A brief overview of the history of interpretation and translation in Korea can shed some light on how the status of translators and interpreters has evolved.

## II. History of Interpretation and Translation

When we look back on Korean history, 1876 is usually cited as the beginning of Korea's opening and its process of modernization. This watershed year can be compared to the year 1868 in Japan, under the "Meiji Restoration," and the year 1842 in China, following the Opium Wars. In other words, all three countries began modernization within a thirty-year period. Then why did it take so long for Korea to accept Western culture, especially in comparison to Japan, a fact that some believe ultimately led to Japanese colonization. Blame is often laid on the missteps of Chosun Dynasty leaders in the late 19th century, and the pro-Japanese and pro-Russian factionalism in the royal palace, which led to Korea's ruin.

However, according to Park, S.R. (1997), though factionalism may have played a part, the bigger reason was the lack of interpreters speaking Western languages. Because there were no interpreters and nobody could speak Western languages, there was no way to study Western sciences. World history in the 19th century was driven by the West and those who learned about science and technology had an advantage over those who did not. In this respect, 19th century Korean history must be viewed in the context of the developments of China and Japan.

In the mid-19th century, there were hundreds of people in Japan who could

speak and write Western languages and China had dozens. However, in Korea, there was not a single person who could interpret or translate Western languages. Finally, in the summer of 1883, Korea's first Western language interpreter appeared on the scene. As a student in Japan, Yoon Chi-Ho (1865-1945) learned English, and subsequently became friends with First Secretary Satow at the British Embassy in Japan and the wife of E.F. Fenellosa, an American professor of philosophy at the University of Tokyo. When he learned that the First Secretary at the Dutch Embassy wanted to learn Korean, he redoubled his efforts to learn English. At about that time, Lucius H. Foote, the new consul to the American Embassy in Korea, stopped in Tokyo in search of a Korean interpreter, which led him to Yoon Chi-Ho. Consequently, Yoon became the first official interpreter for the American Consulate in Korea. An interesting note, during the day, he worked as the official interpreter for the American consul, and in the evening, he was the English interpreter for the royal family.

After working 18 months in that position, he left Chosun (Korea) with Foote to go to Shanghai, where he had the opportunity to study English properly and to learn Chinese as well. Ultimately, he became the first Korean to truly master Korean, Chinese characters, English, Japanese and Chinese. Yet, except for Yoon Chi-Ho, there no one in Chosun who could speak and write Western languages, much less interpret. How different the case of its neighboring countries, where in 1862, it is recorded that there were at least 11 people in China who could speak and write Western languages, and in Japan, several hundred.

History illustrates the contrasts in development of Korea, Japan and China in terms of its relations with the outside world. By the mid-1500's, Western missionaries were allowed to enter China and Japan and to interact with intellectuals. However, such was not the case in Chosun. The first Western missionaries who arrived in 1836 were arrested and beheaded. Who would want to go out of their way to visit a country with such inhospitable hosts? Besides, China and Japan were comparatively easily accessible and people were interested in traveling there. China, a huge country, was already well-known in Europe and it attracted numerous visitors. Occasional typhoons and rough seas led many ships off course, however, and they sailed instead to Japan. China's attitude toward the West also limited exchanges. Although Western missionaries were keenly interested in the country, the Chinese did not reciprocate that interest because they did not believe that they had anything to learn from them. There were those who condescended to read a few Western scientific books, which they found interesting, but none went so far as to learn a Western language. Since the Chinese believe that their nation was the center of the world, it never crossed their minds that Western civilization might have something to offer them or that it might even be superior to theirs.

In contrast, the Japanese, who had been importing culture from Korea since the first century B.C. and well into the first century A.D., readily accepted Western cultures. What is more, Japanese intellectuals were especially interested in foreign culture. Though there was some Christian persecution at first, it did not continue. Before long, the Japanese had even given exclusive trade rights to the Dutch. Through this window that Japan created, the country learned much from the Dutch, who were at the height of their civilization during the 18th century. As a result, in 1774, the Japanese translated a Dutch book on anatomy, the first Western scientific book to be translated

in the East. After that first introduction, numerous scholars translated and adapted Western scientific books.

Thanks to the openness of the Japanese and their readiness to accept foreign culture, Japan began to lay a foundation over a century ago, which ultimately resulted in its becoming the world's second-most important economic power. In contrast, China and Korea, each for different reasons, were unwilling to accept Western culture, and that decision delayed their development in this era of globalization.

The reason for Korea's lag behind Japan in the quest for modernization was its inability to directly access Western science and technology. There were no interpreters—absolutely no one who could understand Western languages. This is to say, from the very beginning, Korea was disadvantaged compared to Japan and China.

After a most unimpressive start, interest in learning English slowly grew. In 1883, P.G. Moellendorf, a German counselor, opened a school for English language, which had a student body of forty students and a faculty that included T.E. Hallifax, an Englishman, together with two Chinese teachers. In 1886, the school was closed down, but was replaced by the first government institution, the Royal English School. Thereafter, similar schools teaching different languages were established. English, French, Japanese, Russian, Chinese and German education became available to those who wished to learn.

Also worth nothing is how interpreters of other languages fared. With the exception of Catholic priests, the first Korean to learn French was Hong Chong-Woo (1850-1913). Although he had gone to France with the intention to study law, he ended up translating Korean classics during his four-year stay in Paris. About a century earlier, Kim Heung-Ryuk, although illiterate, had picked up spoken Russian on his numerous trips to Vladivostok. Then, as Russian became an important foreign language at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kim Heung-Ryuk became a prominent figure, culminating in his appointment in 1897 to what would today be the equivalent of vice-minister of education. In 1898, during negotiations with Russia, it was discovered that he had misappropriated a large sum of money. However, before he was to be exiled to an island off the Korean peninsula, he attempted to poison the king and the prince and was sentenced to death.

Besides Kim Heung-Ryuk, there were several other Russian interpreters, most notably Kim Hak-Woo (1862-1894) who, unlike Kim Heung-Ryuk, was an intellectual who had grown up in Russia. Kim is also known as the inventor of the Korean Morse code, which was used until 1884 when the telegraph was introduced into the country.

### III. The Modern Era

As is the case in many countries, interpreters and translators in Korea had no formal training, but “fell into” the profession by chance. In fact, those who worked as interpreters would be considered the equivalent of the escort or seminar interpreters of today.

The first school of interpretation and translation in modern Korea was the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation, established in 1979 at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. While there was great interest in the program, since there were no professional interpreters, the faculty consisted of professors of language

and literature who had no professional training in the fields of interpretation or translation. Most of the students had no experience abroad either, since foreign travel was restricted until the mid-1980s. Despite its shaky beginning, the graduate school managed to flourish because it not only coincided with the national economic growth of Korea but more importantly because professional interpreters joined the faculty in the late eighties. As in any situation, there was, and still exists to some extent, conflict between the “old guard” which believed that they had vested interests in the graduate school which they had nurtured from the very beginning, and the “new guard” composed of professional interpreters who had been trained abroad, notably at E.S.I.T. (École Supérieure d’Interprètes et Traducteurs) in Paris. Through a gradual process, non-professional instructors were eased out while professional interpreters/instructors began to have an impact on the instruction provided at and curriculum of the graduate school. Thanks to the professional interpreters/instructors, a new generation of conference interpreters and translators were trained properly to become true professionals.

There were two events that really sparked interest in interpretation, especially simultaneous interpretation, in Korea: the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games and the Gulf War in 1991. The Olympic Games did not directly introduce the layperson to conference interpretation, but they did open the country to the Western world. More international conferences were being organized before, during and after the Games than at any other time, thus creating an unprecedented demand for conference interpreters capable of interpreting simultaneously.

In the same way that the Nuremberg trials first introduced simultaneous interpretation in the West, together with U.N. radio broadcasts, a war introduced simultaneous interpretation to ordinary citizens in Korea. The nature of war demands immediacy, and Korean networks were unable to report 24-hours a day on the rapid developments of the Gulf War through broadcasts like CNN. The networks opted to carry the CNN broadcasts live and to have conference interpreters interpret simultaneously. In the initial stage, however, it was a process of trial and error because networks did not know who was, and who was not a conference interpreter. There were almost comical instances of so-called “interpreters” on live TV who were incapable of interpreting even a few sentences. On the other hand, when *bona fide* conference interpreters did have a chance to work, some viewers, accustomed to the scripted commentary of television announcers, complained that the interpreters lacked finesse in their presentations. However, after a few broadcasts, most viewers came to appreciate that the interpreters were not only delivering the core message, but they also managed to refine their presentations.

From the early eighties when the demand for conference interpretation grew, the financial rewards for interpreters were substantial. In the beginning, interpreters could earn in a single day, what a factory worker would earn in a month. Needless to say, some clients balked at paying fees perceived as outrageous, but others accepted them, just as they would high legal or medical bills. However, social acceptance was not on par with the economic recompense. Interpretation was viewed merely as a service provided for a client, and many interpreters found that after a few years, in spite of financial rewards, they were still viewed as professional inferiors. It was, and still is to some extent, perceived by the general public as something that young females might indulge in, with considerable financial compensation, for a while but



not as a lifetime profession. As a result, few male interpreters entered the field and even fewer remained. In fact, both males and females tend to leave the profession early. This explains, in part, why the average conference interpreter in Korea is so young—the early to mid-thirties. In contrast, the world average age of conference interpreters ranges in the fifties, according to an AIIC survey.

In contrast to interpretation, translation has been around for a long time, but was not recognized as a true profession. As Korea began its quest for modernization in the early sixties to become the world's tenth largest trading country, the need to understand foreign cultures and to introduce the outside world to Korea sparked a demand for translators. However, a higher social status did not follow from the increased demand. In fact, there was less recognition for translators than interpreters. The main reason can be traced back to the influence of Confucianism in Korean society. According to Confucian social strata, the *sunbi* or the classical scholar was at the very top, followed by civil servants. Translators, who belong to the tertiary, or service sector, were even lower on the social scale than merchants. Therefore, though relatively well-paid, they did not receive the social recognition that many desired.

One of the more recent noteworthy developments is the growth in broadcast interpretation. This can be explained in several ways. It first began when Korea Broadcast System (KBS) began in 1994, to provide English interpretation of the first 15-20 minutes of the nine o'clock news, its main news program. This event was sparked by the fact that the technology was available for televisions to broadcast a program simultaneously in two languages, Korean and English, and also by the fact that the government deemed English to be essential in its quest for globalization. The fortunate upshot for interpreters was that KBS hired a team of interpreters to work in shifts. The reaction, especially from foreigners residing in Korea, was extremely favorable. But, after a few years, KBS discontinued the service due to a lack of funds. Now, there are only a handful of Korean-Japanese and Korean-English interpreters who interpret international news from time to time.

Fortunately for interpreters, cable service was introduced in the mid-90s. Among the cable stations, one that provides 24-hour news, is YTN, which hired a team of interpreters to interpret news broadcasts from U.S. and Japanese networks. In most cases, the interpreters have time to review the foreign broadcasts and prepare the material before it is actually broadcast in Korea.

In addition to the in-house broadcast interpreters, there are also freelance conference interpreters who are hired for special broadcasts, for example, the funeral of Princess Diana, the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Kim Dae-Jung, and the inauguration of President George W. Bush. Broadcast interpreting is finding its niche on the market. There are different demands made on the interpreter compared to straight conference interpretation. A broadcast interpreter must have a pleasant voice as well as the ability to cope with the added stress of working live, in some cases with 40 million viewers hanging on their every word.

#### IV. Conclusion

In a society like Korea, which is deeply rooted in Confucianism, while the financial compensation for interpreters can be substantial, especially for those who have Korean-English as their language combination, social recognition is relatively low.

Nevertheless, there is still great interest among the general public in interpretation, especially since speaking English fluently is considered an asset in any profession in Korea. Conference interpreters, as such, are considered to be “master” English speakers. Therefore there is a contradictory perception of conference interpreters. On the one hand, they are envied their fluent mastery of foreign languages. On the other, interpretation, as such, is not considered a profession in which one should devote one’s life.

In the case of translation, though there are many translators, they are held in even lower esteem than interpreters because of the relatively low pay. Because of the higher interpretation fees, those who have been trained in interpretation and translation lean towards interpretation. Translation fees are not sufficient to attract high quality translators for long.

One of the major problems that the profession is facing today is that numerous translators and interpreters work vigorously after leaving graduate school but many choose to change professions after several years. One noticeable trend that might rectify the situation is that more and more competent interpreters are choosing to work as in-house interpreters for one to two years before beginning to work as freelancers. In the past, any interpreter worth his/her salt would work freelance upon graduation. But now, even the top graduates choose to work in-house. This not only eases them into the harsh world of interpretation, but also helps them to learn more about a specific field, providing a firm foundation for their work as freelance interpreters.

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