ACCESSING JAPANESE TECHNICAL LITERATURE

Value of Japanese technical literature

Japan produces a mass of technical literature, much of which is available only in Japanese. Madeline Dovale, a graduate of the Program's Technical Japanese Workshop, described how this literature is used by a major consortium of U.S. computer firms, the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation (MCC), Austin, TX. A Japanese-language studies graduate, Dovale tracked technical developments for MCC researchers by scanning Japanese technology journals, translating titles and abstracts, monitoring conferences and proceedings, and using on-line Japanese databases. "Researchers look for very specific information," noted Dovale, "so it is not always necessary to do full translations." When MCC researchers requested a full translation, outside professional translators were used. Approximately 10 translations were done per month; these were available only to MCC member companies.

In 1988, University Microfilms (UMI), Ann Arbor, Michigan, closed down its Japanese technical literature translation service, citing lack of demand. However, Dovale commented, UMI's real problem was that its services were not timely, nor were they on-line. There was a three month time lag in the distribution of title lists and abstracts, and articles that researchers wanted to read then had to be translated--an expensive and lengthy process if done by UMI. At MCC, Dovale was able to get translated articles to researchers within a month of publication in Japanese. Some of the corporate sponsors added that UMI was superfluous because they have their own professional translators versed in technical

fields in Japan and America. However, electrical engineer Vince McNeil commented that translation services which use non-technical specialists to translate often lose important nuances.

Andy Howard, a Hewlett-Packard (H-P) engineer and former fellow of another Japan internship program, sponsored by the American Electronics Association, took the MIT summer workshop to improve his technical Japanese. Few people at H-P know Japanese, Howard said, and few feel the need. His colleagues think that useful information will be published in English. Howard, himself, reads Japanese technical articles to learn about new developments in Japan. Hewlett-Packard does not use his Japanese beyond translating occasional messages, but he hopes it will in the future. H-P partially supported his participation in the workshop, giving him a two-month leave of absence at half-salary. This was supplemented by an NSF Fellowship. Mark Holzbach, a former intern who also took the summer technical language workshop, said he was now able to read Japanese technical manuals - an important aid to his startup consulting business selling software services to Japanese customers. Holzbach also uses his technical Japanese to translate articles on a freelance basis.

Japanese "gray" technical information

IBM's McGroddy talked about the "gray" literature - information on Japanese technology development which is not proprietary but which is not published in journals. Such information is hard for American companies to acquire, but has great value if obtained in a timely manner. McGroddy gave three ex-

amples of gray information: discussions between friends indifferent companies, discussions about standards, and discussions between vendors and customers. These discussions frequently occur in industry and trade group meetings, for which unpublished documents sometimes exist but are difficult to obtain. However, it is not impossible to get gray literature. Madeline Dovale noted that MCC has developed a range of personal contacts within Japanese companies, and is often able to get information others cannot. This example shows the value to an American company of a technically literate and well-connected Japanese speaking staff. It is necessary to have someone who is more than a translator of documents.