



With MA degrees from Michigan State University and Columbia University and a PhD from Boston University, Dr. Noriko Sugimori brought a wealth of experience with her to Kalamazoo College where she currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Japanese. Currently, Sugimori and her students are benefitting from a three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, contributing to the Oral History in the Liberal Arts (OHLA) project and collaborating with other colleges. Sugimori has a team of students at Kalamazoo who are working with her to transcribe and translate the memories of several interviewees who were children or teens during WWII, the first project to use the bilingual capabilities of the OHMS (Oral History Metadata Synchronizer) web application.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

Kalamazoo College: Oral Histories and The Oral History Metadata Synchronizer

Oral Histories of Japanese World War II Survivors

The interviews first began as Sugimori was working on her dissertation and researching the relationship between *lèse-majesté*, or the crime of violating the dignity of a reigning state, and the use of Japanese honorifics in newspapers from the World War II era. Though her initial focus was on linguistics and the social changes affecting language usage, the interviewees—scores of people who were born before 1932—were powerfully impacted by the opportunity to share their memories of growing up in a country embroiled in war.

After her doctorate was completed, she moved on to an oral history project in order to frame these war memories. Though audio-taping was the best available technology when she began her work, she later added digital videotaping. Then, a few years ago, she learned of the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer technology, which offered a platform to simultaneously publish bilingual transcriptions alongside metadata of these video accounts. Because she was videotaping people who were teens and children during the war, these firsthand accounts had never been documented, and they offered insight into the war that had never been shared, not only a unique contribution to the study of linguistics but a project with emotional power as well.

The benefits for students at Kalamazoo College are also significant. They aren't just studying grammar exercises and language usage; they are seeing an interviewee's facial expressions and body language, giving a deeply human voice to this information—and a cultural context for appreciating these stories that simply can't be matched by traditional academic tools. There is a humanity to these stories that offers students a more thorough understanding of otherwise dry historical facts. Students experience these stories and see firsthand the powerful influence these memories of war had on the survivors.

Offering a Deeper Understanding of the Language

Christa Scheck is a recent graduate who has worked with Sugimori on this project for over a year and thus knows the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer well. Scheck explains that much of her work on the project doubled as a learning experience for her in terms of both the content and the opportunity to familiarize herself with “speaking patterns in such open and free-form dialogues as these.” Scheck adds that Sugimori's enthusiasm for the project and support for her students makes what could be a daunting project engaging and rewarding.

“Aside from contributing to my developing understanding of the language,” Scheck states,

“I often found the interviews to be interesting to me on an emotional and historical level as well. There's the expected tragedies of losing family members, friends, and houses in air-raids, as well as poverty and famine in the wake of the losing war; less expected to me are speeches talking about Japan's sociopolitical structure at the time, the issues surrounding emperor-worship, the harshness of the Japanese school system, a poet's recollection of how an exploding ship looked like fireworks, etc.”

Covering Real, Grounded, Lived Experiences

As these interviews covered profound lived experiences, Scheck found them to be incredibly real and grounded because these were otherwise ordinary people retelling stories of extraordinary circumstances. When gleaning facts from a textbook, she adds, it can be easy to be “emotionally distant” because the history feels so far removed, but she has found purpose and meaning in her work “making these voices more accessible.”

Scheck is also intrigued by the technological aspect of the project, in that bilingual digital archives of oral histories are fairly rare, especially between Japanese and English translations, and the resource is set up to make that information accessible, after a bit of tweaking the system. For instance,



initially, the program was built to recognize European languages and sought spaces in words as part of the synchronization data. Because Japanese doesn't have spaces, the sync originally treated entire paragraphs as one word.

Carolyn Topper is another recent graduate who began working on the project this past year, and she has had a hand in improving the quality of the metadata through a creative approach to a hurdle she faced in her interview assignment. Topper began working on the project as part of Sugimori's Advanced Intermediate Japanese, and she has stayed on after completing the class in the role of research assistant. This past March, Topper began working on the translation of a Japanese-American woman named Masae. As they started translating Masae's interview, Sugimori asked Topper to find out which bombing Masae experienced.

She and Sugimori quickly realized that the bombing Masae experienced was not readily found in materials that the general public has access to, unlike other specific battles or events that took place in towns with larger populations. In fact, Masae's town, Totsuka, was not covered in existing English-language material. Having grown up with parents in the Air Force, Topper knew there were people on military bases with an astonishing level of

Ric S. Sheffield believes Sugimori's project offers one of the "best examples of the potential for bilingual digital storytelling," and the attention she has garnered speaks to the "capacity of oral history methodolgoies to bring these narratives alive for both the academic community and those simply interested in good human nature stories."

knowledge about and access to records on events from bases at and near to where they were stationed, so she reached out to Kadena AB in Okinawa and Yokota AB in Tokyo. Within the hour, the historian at Kadena replied with a possible date based on Topper's details; in light of this data, Topper was able to pin down the location of the attack Masae had experienced, and a report that mentioned Masae's hometown by name. This new information, uncovered by a resourceful student, will accompany Masae's interview, along with links to sources and maps.

Currently, Topper is working on a final translation of Masae's interview, where the English is still a bit "rough," so she'll review

the entire translation with one of the native Japanese speakers on the team because Japanese-English dictionaries are sometimes "insufficient for capturing the right connotation of a word." Having both English and Japanese native speakers working together, they are more likely to ensure that "as little information as possible is lost" from the Japanese transcript and that the English translation is fluid and coherent.

Like Scheck, Topper has benefitted from this project with Sugimori both academically and personally. She shares, "Translating someone's experiences as opposed to a script from a textbook has helped me to pay more attention to nuance and how Japanese

spoken language actually works. Regarding emotional satisfaction, I think that it's very important to have these kinds of records of human experience available because unlike reading a more generalized account of history or sifting through pages of data, listening to people talk inspires more empathy and interest."

Chemistry Majors Become Unlikely Candidates for an Oral History Project

Alex Fairhall, a Kalamazoo sophomore who is majoring in chemistry, initially enrolled in the advanced language class in preparation for his year abroad. Once he finished

the language requirement, however, he viewed future development as a personal benefit, rather than a strictly academic one. At this time, he began a translation of a Korean professor's experience during the time of the Japanese occupation of Korea, the time leading up to and continuing into World War II.

As Fairhall worked on the translation, he grew increasingly interested in the history that surrounded the man whose life he was studying and consequently developed more interest in the relationships between Korea, China, and Japan during that era. He adds, "The work I'm given is interesting and I feel that it advances not only my skills in translating and understanding Japanese, but also advances my understanding of history and the perceptions of individuals far removed from myself."

Min Soo Kim is a Korean student who is also a Chemistry major. He accompanied Sugimori on her trip to South Korea last year. As a Korean native, he transcribed and translated an interview with Lee Ok Sun, a "comfort woman" survivor in World War II, in essence one of many "sex slaves" provided to soldiers.

Kim admits that he initially enrolled in Japanese because he needed an easier course to compensate for two challenging and work-intensive science courses, and he had already learned Japanese on his own time, so he assumed the course would be a lighter experience to offset his difficult work in chemistry courses. When he was first brought into the project, he was really looking for little more than establishing a broad set of experiences that might better serve his future career, but he found himself deeply sympathetic to Lee's story, even though, he explains, that the history of comfort-women is well known to Koreans.

Kim shares, "The story from an actual survivor was delivered so vividly that I could feel the hardship that she had encountered and, before I realized, I felt tears in my eyes." With this newly developed personal connection, the work of transcribing her interview became more than an academic exercise. It was his chance to let others develop the same level of awareness he found in the firsthand experience. He adds, "This is why I believe that the opportunity to participate in this project is meaningful in both personal growth and contribution to social justice in a way."

Yoji Hayashibe is a visiting international student from Waseda University in Japan. As one of Sugimori's several teaching assistants, Hayashibe worked with other students on interview translations. He has found the project to be fulfilling and meaningful both in terms of career development and at an

COLLABORATION MADE SIMPLE HUDDLEVU



FSR's HuddleVU family of products are flexible packaged systems that are intuitive to use, built to last in high use student-centered areas, and don't require software downloads or wireless access.

Ideal for...

- Small Group Study Spaces
- Active Learning Classrooms
- Meeting Rooms
- Large Flex Areas
- Libraries

FSR's HuddleVU furniture line offers three table options, with a variety of user configurations available. Furniture finishes are customizable and can be made to compliment any room decor.



Call today for a FREE thumb drive, Color Brochure and Complete Catalog on floor, wall and table boxes.



FSR products are Made in the USA and comply with the American Recovery Act. FSR is a woman-owned and operated company.



PROUDLY MADE IN THE USA!

1-800-332-FSR1 • www.fsrinc.com

emotional level. In giving people an opportunity to speak for the first time about their wartime experiences, he saw the cathartic benefits to the interviewees, as they found a way to verbalize what they had never before dissected outside of their own memories. He notes that, unlike learning of events from textbooks alone, he experienced a deep empathy as the “actual victims were so vivid and persuasive.”

One of the Best Examples of Bilingual Digital Storytelling

Ric S. Sheffield is Professor of Legal Studies & Sociology and Interim Chair of the American Studies Department at Kenyon College, and he is one of the colleagues that has helped spearhead this Oral History project. He first met Sugimori in Ann Arbor, Michigan, during a conference sponsored by the Great Lakes Colleges Association where he was presenting a summary of his own oral history based project, *The Community Within*.

Sugimori sought him out after his presentation, requesting guidance in developing her own project. Sheffield notes, “After quite a bit of discussion including exchanges with other attendees interested in similar projects, we formed a group comprised of faculty and digital specialists who were interested in exploring ways in which the Association could support such endeavors.”

The next summer, Sugimori visited the Oral History Institute co-directed by Sheffield at Kenyon College, gathering additional skills in the best practices in the field. Next, Sugimori attended a workshop run by the other OHLA co-director, Brooke Bryan at Antioch College, where she learned more about indexing, transcribing, and display tools—all which have been since integrated into Sugimori’s project to great effect which has made her World War II project “so noteworthy,” Sheffield shares.

Sheffield believes Sugimori’s project offers one of the “best examples of the potential for bilingual digital storytelling,” and the attention she has garnered speaks to the “capacity of oral history methodology to bring these narratives alive for both the academic community and those simply interested in good human nature stories.”

As she guides her Japanese language students through transcription and translation before moving to indexing and presentation, Sheffield explains, Sugimori has “designed and shepherded a project that brings a unique insight into the aftermath of the Second World War upon residents of Japan at that

time that otherwise might not have been available to general audiences. The stories are compelling to both Japanese speakers and non-speakers alike.”

For more information on Sugimori’s oral history project, visit <http://ohla.info/war-memories-intergenerational-intercultural-oral-history-project/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger, editor of PUPN MAG, earned her B.A and M.Ed. degrees from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham.

**CARDIO & STRENGTH | BENCHES & RACKS
ROOM ACCESSORIES | FLOORING**

Discover the Most Durable & Efficient Family of Cardio Equipment

800.862.1509

GreenSeriesFitness.com
info@GreenSeriesFitness.com

GREEN
Series™