Few events bring the world together like the Olympic Games. With preparations for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in full swing, Japan is also bracing for another kind of competition: securing interpreters for the games. Ever since its election, Japan has been taking advantage of its role as host of the most prestigious global sport event to reshape its multilingual language industry and international communication industry, in order to provide increased access to language services and facilitate interactions between Japanese and foreign sportspersons, dignitaries, officials, and tourists.

The Olympics: a matter of international communication
The Olympic Games are considered to be the foremost international sports competition, with more than 200 nations participating. For the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, an estimated 20 million overseas visitors will visit Japan and thousands will attend Olympic events, with an already confirmed US$ 3 billion in domestic sponsorship revenue, 3.5 million tickets already sold, and an expected total additional revenue of US$ 5.6 billion.1 To maximise opportunities for economic growth and internationalisation, Japan is preparing to provide the best visitor experience, as well as to promote its economy and its cultural and political development.

When I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo, I had just developed a socio-historical perspective on the genealogical orientation of the language industry in Japan,2 as I was particularly interested in how the professional practice of interpreting emerged, was perpetuated, and changed in the context of the neoliberal Japanese and global economy.3 My research involved the study of the linguistic and social interactions that take place in the rapidly changing world of international communication.4 In this way, I was in Japan connecting with interpreters, practitioners, and organisations for data collection. I met two retired professionals who had worked at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. In her interview, one of the informants, 75-year-old ‘Mariko’ recalled: “Japan’s government and the Olympic organising committee set up its codes of practice, which lives on also symbolised the coming of age of interpreting as a profession of its own. From being a small project to modernise the city’s infrastructure, to being part of a country finally showing interest in its role as host of the rest of the world, both through cultural and economic integration that set up its codes of practice, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, to the point that just the 5 top language service providers alone generated a total revenue of 300 million dollars in 2018.5

Interpreting new developments beyond the 2020 Tokyo Olympics
Although the 2020 Tokyo Olympics are likely to create new waves (and awes) of demand for interpreters, we are not yet sure what the mindset required to thrive in the market is changing as well. Technological developments are reshaping the Japanese language interpretation services industry, which is increasingly working to adhere to customer-specific corporate language services, take work on demand, and to increase quality and productivity.6 7 The 2020 Tokyo Olympics are no exception in their approach to connect Japan with the rest of the world, both through human and machine interpreters. 8 The market may raise fascinating avenues of inquiry regarding the impact of the joint work of human and machine interpreting. As such, the games may offer insights into a “further way in which of people live together and co-existence takes place […] as the effect of the joint work of human practices and the performativity of materials”.9 Against this backdrop, we will have to observe the impact of the joint work of human and machine interpreters.

Notes
1. https://tinyurl.com/y3aodkgv
2. https://tinyurl.com/yesngy
3. https://tinyurl.com/am1964
6. https://tinyurl.com/yesngy