

L&H launches iTranslator™ Online

Written by:

François Rossi

Taking advantage of the ISP conference in Rome on October 2, a reason which will become apparent later, Lernout & Hauspie unveiled their new Internet-based translation technology, iTranslator™.

A demo of the service was arranged for a few journalists invited for the occasion. Florita Mendez, President of Globalization and Translation at L&H, assisted by Benoit Goes, iTranslator's Product Manager, gave a tour of the service and were at hand to answer the questions from the audience, mainly composed of IT journalists.



Before tackling the service itself, background facts were given to explain the rationale behind the technology, some of which are interesting enough to be listed here without wanting to do L&H's own marketing. First of all, 78% of the Web's content is in English whilst 96% of all e-business transactions are conducted in English. Secondly, a recent survey (no details as to who made it) concluded that customers were three times more likely to buy a product if addressed in their own

language. With these in mind, L&H mission statement is 'to help people communicate and understand by combining technologies and human expertise', an honourable purpose, certainly, but one that does not distract from the hard truth that L&H have found a business model that, in my opinion, will not only succeed but which will also give them an edge over the competition, namely the Alpnat, Xerox and other Berlitz of this world.

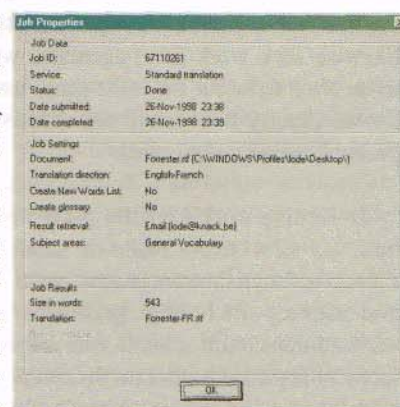
There is little doubt that Systran joining forces with AltaVista to provide free machine translation to enable users to display English Web pages in their own languages was somewhat of a coup. The new iTranslator™ goes some way towards positioning L&H on the map, at least as far as the general public is concerned. However, L&H have come up with a much smarter approach. Not only the publicity generated is a positive point and enhances brand recognition but the service itself is supposed to be a money-making scheme. This will be examined in greater details but I shall explain myself first.

L&H have decided that success of the service is first and foremost dependent on alliances with ISPs (Internet Service Providers). We are talking here about iTranslator™ Express and iTranslator™

Online, the Internet-based system since there is a version for companies called iTranslator™ Enterprise. The idea is to reach the public as well as small to medium size businesses. The way to reach them is to have ISPs put a link to iTranslator's home page (<http://www.itranslator.com>) on their portals in exchange for a share of the profit generated. It is a win-win situation for both L&H and its partners. ISPs merely have to put a link on their site, no real expense here, and get the rewards arising from their referrals. L&H get 'free' advertising and 'new' business not originating from their traditional client base.

Indeed, firms like L&H tend to have major accounts and clients who have a need for a reasonable amount of translation on a semi-permanent basis. With iTranslator™, they can penetrate the market where the need for translation is either occasional or small. Thus, L&H have launched what they probably see as total market presence, a step towards becoming the undisputed number one in translation and globalisation services. One thing is for certain, Florita Mendez herself qualified the scheme as representing the future for her division. With these personal views in mind, it is time to give the reader details about the service.

iTranslator™ is in fact a family composed of iTranslator™ Enterprise, iTranslator™ Online and iTranslator™ Express. The launch in Rome only dealt with the



Online service but we will give an overview of Enterprise and Express. As the name suggests, the former is geared towards companies who need both accurate and 'gist' translation. Let me quote the press release telling us that 'L&H iTranslator™ Enterprise deliver a server-hosted, browser-based, thin-client solution for multi-national corporations who need fast, gist-level translation of documents, e-mail, or any other text. Enterprise accepts ASCII, RTF and HTML text, and can route any document to L&H's human translation services. A feature called «publish» provides real-time, gist-level translation of a company's intranet or other web pages. Publish accepts web pages in one language and returns the

web page in the target language while preserving the page's original format'.

In the Enterprise edition, L&H's own machine translation engine is heavily customised to the customer's requirements. I will not bore you to death with the techie bit, suffice it to add that the client-server utilises Microsoft's ASP technology, it requires either Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 or Netscape Navigator 4.0, and it will run on Windows 95/98/NT/2000 whilst also compatible with Lotus Notes. Express is a service designed for ISPs, Portals, Content Providers, Mobile Operators and e-Commerce sites. It enables these customers to offer machine translation whilst leaving the server aspect to L&H's own server farm. No doubt that L&H commercial force will have a mine of potential clients to recruit.

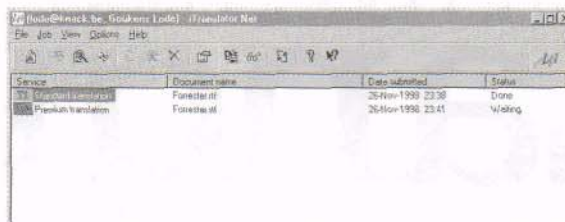
iTranslator™ Online is a combination of online translation vending services and free machine translation for text of up to 5210 characters. The free aspect of the service is the obvious carrot, hoping that customers who make use of the service will request human translation whenever they need more than an approximation of any text content. In this case, customers can submit text in ASCII, RTF or HTML format to get a quotation, qualified as instant by L&H, and pay by credit card through a secure server should they wish to go ahead.

The turn-around of any text submitted is currently 1,250 words under 48 hours. Not particularly speedy but improved speeds will probably be introduced if the service meets with success. Once the customer has entered his or her details, a control panel can be accessed designed to track information on job status, namely, 'submitted', 'in progress' and 'delivered'. Once the job has been completed, the customer can retrieve the translated text via e-mail or through the browser's download functions.

In order to alleviate fear of fraud and loss of sensitive data, L&H have ensured that all aspects of the service are encrypted to the level of the customer's browser. Now that the United States have removed their restrictions imposed on 128 bit technology, this means that most users will benefit from maximum strength encryption.

As far as available languages are concerned, iTranslator™ Online currently offers 29 combinations for human translation and 16 pairs for machine translation, although Benoit Goes stated that machine translation involving Asian languages and other double-byte languages would be supported in the near future; they may even be supported by the time you read this article.

Operation-wise, the service is slick and the control panel feature provides useful feedback. Overall, it makes it easier for customers to control cost and



Service	Document name	Date submitted	Status
Free translation	Francais.it	20-Nov-1998 23:38	Done
Premium translation	Francais.it	20-Nov-1998 23:41	Waiting

process and great care has been given to user-friendliness. The only point I would criticise in the interface is the requirement to display the site in 800x600 screen resolution mode if the control panel is to be viewed in its entirety. Saying this, computer users have more and more access to a 15-inch screen which is adequate for the job.

In my own opinion, L&H have devised a scheme which will meet with success. It has been well implemented and is certain to attract users through the alliance forged with ISPs. The latter will always be receptive to the idea of getting more income, particularly at a time where profits are dwindling due to the on-going battle for cheaper and cheaper Internet access. Coming up with a proposal to get revenues other than those generated by adverts and the dreaded banners, which are the modern plague of Internet users and one of the direct reasons why users experience of the World Wide Web is turned into the World Wide Wait, at least until we all get fast cable access, is a master-stroke and the key to iTranslator™ Online's success in its first implementation stages.

At the time of the launch in Rome, L&H had already entered into an agreement with a major Japanese Internet provider and BT Click, the pay-as-you-go service provided by British Telecom. Meeting ISPs in Rome was therefore the ideal circumstances for the location of the launch, and I have no doubt that more ISPs will have joined the scheme by the time you read this. The second coup de génie is the potential effect on Joe Public. L&H can look forward to getting myriads of small one-off jobs without dedicating armadas of reps trying to get them in the first place. Through portals, they get maximum penetration with minimum effort as well as improved project management once the infrastructure is in place. Development costs aside, the benefits on translation costs will yield greater profit; the goal for any translation firm.

With iTranslator™ Online, L&H have decidedly marked points over the competition, if only by being the first to start a new business model, but I would not be surprised if the competition were to wake up and propose similar systems soon. However, it has to be said that, with an early lead, L&H may be hard to catch up and may well end up with a nice and sizeable chunk of the Internet market. Whether this will happen or not depends on the quality of the service provided and the amounts of ISPs signing up to the scheme. So far so good.