

IS MT A THREAT TO PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATORS ?

CAN THE "LITTLE ONES" SURVIVE ?

IS SMALL STILL BEAUTIFUL ?

by John H. Hayes

I was goaded into writing this article by someone suggesting that I had my "head in the sand" vis-à-vis the onrush of modern equipment, simply because I said that "I am not worried about all these alleged new developments, things as they are are likely to see me out". This latter statement was completely misunderstood because I really meant that things will not only "see me out" but many other and younger translators and may, in the main, stay much as they are for many years or even decades to come. This, at least as far as small specialist translation outfits are concerned.

The following suggestions are all somewhat oversimplified in the interest of brevity and because, in any event, far too many words are made about all these newfangled gadgets like word processors, data banks, computer translations etc., etc.. All these involve basically simple machines intended to help man and not necessarily to oust him. Moreover, the general public - and this includes many translators - stand in quite unfounded awe of anything called a computer or computerized. A computer is an exceptionally dumb animal only as capable as whosoever feeds it. Its greatest claim to fame is a relentless and totally reliable memory together with the (not always all that high) speed with which it has access to its memory.

Because it is relevant to my somewhat slanted views and because I have not written anything in the Newsletter for some years and also because readers may wish to decide just how qualified or otherwise I am to "hold forth" on these worrying subjects, may I be allowed to reintroduce myself briefly :

Chartered mechanical engineer, full-time free-lance translator for the last 20 years, work concerned

exclusively with German/English, English/German translations in the machine tool, automotive, production engineering, press working, machine tool electrics and electronics sectors. Turnover is some one million words per annum, mostly consisting of instruction manuals, publicity catalogues, handbooks and technical papers. Much of this work produced in camera-copy form or on transparent sheets. All typescripts sent to customers are in the form of clean copy free of corrections. Work is handled by self and three typists: one English, one bilingual, one German. Some 70 clients supplied.

If, as is frequently suggested, the "big ones" are a real threat or if MT were really serious competition, why has my turnover steadily risen every year (beyond inflation increases) and reached a record level in 1981. I cannot be an isolated instance.

There can be no question that data banks would be a real help to many translators. Nor can there be any question that - depending on how a translator works - word processors offer advantages in our profession. I do not therefore propose to discuss these aids at all as, in any event, they represent no threat.

What I am concerned with here are the aspects which appear to worry many translators, namely

- A) The fear that MT will become an unbeatable competitor
- B) The fear that the "big ones" are eventually going to swallow the "little ones".

Let us look at "A" first:

Some of our younger members and readers may not realise that efforts to put MT on the map go back some 25 years. In that time various systems have been tried and have produced results varying from absolutely useless to quite promising. Recent efforts have created systems which under certain circumstances can be successful, given pre-editing and post-editing (I oversimplify, as mentioned earlier).

To keep this article on a very profane level (I purposely

want to make things uncomplicated because it is very easy to lose the crux of the issue by getting into excessively sophisticated wordage), I would propose that MT is capable of the following:

- 1) Rough copy in - Very rough copy out
- 2) Pre-edited copy in - Rough copy out
- 3) Pre-edited copy in - Less rough copy out
+ post-editing

Having read the glossy literature of one of the manufacturers of MT systems, one might easily get the impression that the problem is entirely solved. What is more, the literature suggests that mere "translators" can be upgraded (sic) to become efficient "editors". Whatever do they mean by that? In reality the situation is rather different.

If the system could translate like a human translator there would be no need for post-editing. If the system can not translate like a human translator and post-editing cannot be avoided, who is going to be the editor? If such an editor is not a fully qualified translator who can cope with the particular language combination and subject and fully understand the source text, the chances of his producing a correct translation even after editing are slim. What he will in fact produce is a pretty piece of English copy which may or may not be a good translation. And where is one to find such personnel? If the user of an MT system can find someone who was formerly a successful translator and employ him for editing, how long will he last before boredom drives him to distraction? If sub-standard editors are used, how long will it be before the translation user finds out that what he is buying is not what he paid for?

Naturally, the oversimplified situation outlined above does not apply in every instance but must by the very nature of things represent something near the truth.

Now let us look at MT from a value-for-money point of view. Given an adequate dictionary in the computer

memory (itself quite a feat), the computer will produce rapid results. However, the time taken to go from source copy to pre-edited copy to rough computer output to post-edited output is a variable depending on the skill and knowledge of the editor or editors. This could be quite an expense factor. Then there is the cost of the basic equipment. This is extremely high at the moment (hardware and software) but likely to become cheaper over the years. It will never be "dirt cheap". As far as the time element is concerned, the MT systems currently available are by no means staggeringly fast despite some of the theoretical times claimed. Pre-editing and post-editing are in many instances more time-consuming than translation by an efficient specialist in the subject.

It seems to me that it will still take many years before MT becomes sufficiently efficient and affordable to make any real inroads into the sort of translation most of us are engaged in.

Another aspect we have not so far touched upon is the question of translating any "notional" copy. Much of the work that goes through our hands requires quite a lot of copy-writing and new thinking. In other words, the copy has to be realigned to a different market, not just a different language. No computer is ever likely to do this.

On the other hand, we are moving into a society more and more ready to accept "sub-standard" language for a number of more or less valid reasons. (The way in which the business world has learnt to accept telex communications despite misspellings, telegram style, lack of punctuation, endless mistakes etc. is typical of the "garbage for expediency" syndrome). If man continues to be conditioned in this way, mediocre translations produced by MT will indeed become acceptable and replace many mediocre translators. However, as in every other walk of life, there will always be room for excellence and the personal touch.

This same philosophy will keep the "small" translator alive, either cooperating or competing with the "big ones". And this brings me to point of concern "B":

The impression given by the big translation organizations, namely, that they can "do anything" - which, incidentally, is one of the reasons for believing that the "little man" may be on his way out - is largely window-dressing and serious translation buyers are only too aware of this. Thus, for example, the claim that "high technology translation" is carried out may simply mean that word processors are in use (not such a "big deal" these days). The claim that "we have "x thousand" translators in "y" countries to deal with "z" translations at our disposal" may simply mean that there is access to a list. Whether or not the best possible translator is in fact available at the time is quite another matter.

In the end, all the so-called "big ones" fish the same translators' pond. The number of good fish in it is both small and finite. The claim of access to a virtually unlimited number of translators is therefore false because other agencies have access to the same people and may already be keeping them busy.

Then again, since the "big ones" do not employ all that many, if any, inside translators and since they must therefore make use of the "little ones", why should not the latter survive at infinitum. Only if and when translation firms open up with "inside" facilities for all languages and subjects (an organizational feat somewhat more daunting than the - still inadequate - translation capability of the EEC at Brussels) is there the remotest risk of small translators going out of business.

Indeed, my own clients (who are not agencies but translation users) much appreciate working directly with the translator. There is no "toing and froing" in triangular situations. There is direct access to the authority and there is absolute consistency of results. No agency can guarantee the latter as they may not always be able to hire the same translator every time.

Translating is also a very personal business and the user is very aware that he is best served by knowing and having direct contact with his translator.

I have spent decades in training my clients to think

in terms of individual translators for each language. The fact that they have to cope with the clumsy requirement of placing several orders if the same job is needed in several languages (agencies certainly have the edge here with "one order only") is more than offset by the many other advantages mentioned.

It should by now be obvious that I hold the view that a capable young translator with flair and (preferably) some special subject or subjects has nothing to fear in the immediate future. Naturally, an eye should be kept on MT development as a switch into editing is always a possibility in the unlikely event of an electronic breakthrough.

Two last words :

Beware of the client who can't see the translated copy beyond the pretty type-face.

To me "small" always was and still is very beautiful.