

Machine Translation

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On the one hand, proponents of universal language look optimistically to the prospect of all human kind speaking a common tongue. Leibniz went so far as to conjecture a calculating machine based on a universal alphabet into which all concepts in all languages could be rendered into a common understanding;

"Once the characteristic numbers for most concepts have been set up, however, the human race will have a new kind of instrument which will increase the power of the mind much more than optical lenses strengthen the eyes....Reason will be right beyond all doubt only when it is everywhere as clear and certain as only arithmetic has been until now."[1]

On the other hand, Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, postulates the mechanism of universal language translation (the *Bablefish*) as being the singular greatest cause of wars in all of history. It seems that once people *really* understand what they are saying to one another, tolerance is forfeit.

Thinkers of either camp are bound to take interest in the recent surges of machine translation and the global internet. All the editors of *Philosophy and Computers* had heard of automatic translating software (translationware) though none had spent the \$150 and up to discover whether it might be useful. Thus, we researched translationware and asked the vendors for review copies. Globalink obliged with their *Power Translator* and this editor found Transparent's *Easy Translator* on a bargain and could not resist. This issue of *Philosophy and Computers* provides reviews of those two translationware products. Language Force sent their *Universal Translator*, which boasts instant to/from translation of twenty-five languages (including Esperanto, Greek, Japanese, and Swahili) in one program along with browser support and authoring tools for all the languages, but too late for this issue. If these reviews prove useful, we will consider following up on new products.

The translationware sought for review in this issue is all designed to work with the internet. The promise is to allow translation of various languages to and from one's native tongue for use in email and reading web pages. If these products work as some imagine they might, we will find whole new worlds of people to converse with via email and we will be able to make use of the web resources in unfamiliar languages. My experience is that these programs are akin to a tourist phrase-book: useful to get around with in unfamiliar terrain, but never adequate for holding even a rudimentary conversation. Our reviewers, Larry Hinman and Eric Salahub, make the limits of current products (those we have tried) pretty plain. Our readers, however, may find interest in trying translationware themselves or engaging in the debates about the nature

and value of such programming. Here are some web resources for such readers:

Alta Vista, the popular search engine provider, has incorporated *Bablefish* into their site and provides no cost use of the resource. This is a free and easy way to try out translationware on the web. You can search for web pages in German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese then exchange them immediately into English (or do it vice-versa). As a kind of phrase-book for web travelers, this can provide access to sites that would otherwise remain entirely opaque.

WebPlexer takes a different approach at the Language Automation Inc. site with a server-side translation tool that determines the language of the individual visitor and delivers the language appropriate pages. My guess is that *WebPlexer* reads the language preference selected in the user's browser and goes from there. Translated web pages on the fly are an intriguing approach to producing multi-language sites.

Language Automation Inc. also provides a top quality resource for translators and translation studies with *The Translator's Home Companion*. This site hosts links to online dictionaries, libraries, products, translation services, newsgroups, forums, conferences, and much more.

If controversy peaks interest, then the *WinDi* site will whet your appetite. *WinDi* is a translation aid program that takes a stance against machine (automatic) translation. Their product approach is to provide a kind of dictionary checker/guide that proceeds through several stages of document translation. While it seems more work than machine translation, *WinDi* claims to be more accurate and controllable. The site provides evaluation programs for download, though I was not successful in installing the version I tried. Most interesting is the literature *WinDi* provides to establish its case against machine translation. Especially the full texts of "Why Can't a Computer Translate More Like a Person" by Alan K. Melby and "Machine Translation: The Disappointing Past and Present," by Martin Kay. The arguments about language, meaning, context, and grammar will be valuable to some philosophers interested in language and AI.

Notes

1. Leibniz, ca. 1679, in Loemker, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, 342; cited in George B. Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines* (Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass: 1997), p. 38.