

BY
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Machine Translation— Is it Working in Japan?

Over a decade ago, readers of one of Japan's leading dailies learned of the revolutionary development of an "automatic translation machine" by a company called Bravice International. Bravice has since gone under, but the dream of automated J-E translations done quickly and cheaply by monolingual operators lives on in Japan, where J-E translation is an essential part of an export-driven economy.

Claims of automated translation have, however, been tuned down a bit, and these days MT (machine translation) vendors are more likely to talk of machine-aided translation, since it has become difficult to convince sophisticated users that machines can translate by themselves.

Gloomy News from the MT Front

But just where does the technology stand? This long-time MT watcher in Japan has been visiting vendors and trying out systems since the first wave of hype in the early '80s, and can say with confidence that, despite all the efforts and advertising of the major computer manufacturers in the MT field, a J-E translation system which could compete with or substantially aid a human translator, in terms of either quality or cost, is anything but on the visible horizon. Although companies like Fujitsu have been able to sell systems internally and to subsidiaries, nonincestuous MT system users are difficult to find. The cost involved in pre- and post-editing, and the intrinsic problem of using a "translator" with neither target- nor source-language native skill have outweighed the hype and hope of MT. The market response to the question of whether MT is working has been clear: maybe someday.

Japanese J-E Translation— Who Does It and Why?

Japan, which often lays claim to uniqueness as if the claim itself were unique, might have yet another uniqueness about which to boast.

There are between 5,000 and 10,000 translators serving the J-E (Japanese into English) market in Japan. Numbers alone, however, don't tell the entire story.

Contrary to the common wisdom outside Japan, almost all of Japan's J-E translation is done by Japanese writing English as a foreign language, which is then often the object of heroic damage-repair efforts by foreign rewriters. Since many rewriters are non-Japanese-reading refugees from such blighted industries as English teaching, a bad translation can easily be turned into a seamless mistranslation in flawless English.

Why is Japan different? One reason is that the available pool of native Japanese translators outnumbers native-English-writing translators by a ratio of at least 10-to-1. Cost consciousness might be another factor, but bucking the tide of common wisdom is not necessarily a way to reduce costs; one still has to pay for the repair to the original translations.

There are other aspects. For-profit translation schools abound, their advertising typically promising high-income alternate careers for young people wary of dedicating their lives to a corporation; hence, the large supply of translators. Another factor is the belief—still held by

(continued on page 34) ▶

some—that a translator must be Japanese to understand a source text written in Japanese.

But the outlook for non-Japanese J-E translators in Japan is anything but bleak. Translation consumers are slowly maturing, and their demands for quality are still far beyond the capacity of Japan's tiny corps of non-Japanese translators. So foreign translators in Japan can make hay while the sun shines on this sparsely populated high-end niche of the Japanese translation market.

Translation in Japan After the Bubble Burst—

Survivors and Casualties

The burst of Japan's bubble economy forced many businesses to make adjustments, and translation was no exception.

Just as a hint that a condominium would be built drew lines of eager customers to real estate brokers' doors; some translation consumers also bought first and thought later.

But things have radically changed. Manufacturers were the hardest hit. Many had their translation budgets slashed to the point at which most J-E translation needed to be done in-house. Those more fortunate were able to afford rewriting work for their in-house translations.

For translation providers, the burst of the bubble meant more unbillable time devoted to working up quotations for jobs which often didn't materialize. This request-for-quote pre-purchase barrier seems to have remained as a feature of the translation business landscape, even after a measure of recovery from the gloomier days in the industry.

Another inevitable effect was downward pressure on prices. Translation companies which were highly dependent upon giants such as NEC and Fujitsu felt pressure to lower their already low prices. Naturally, translators working for such providers felt the effects.

The need to file patents overseas in English turned out to be quite immune to the worst effects of the collapse, and translators serving this market sector found themselves doing business as

(continued on page 35) ♦

Connecting with the Japanese Translator Community...

Formed in 1985 by a small group of individual translators, the Japan Association of Translators has grown in stature and variety of activities, and continues to grow, enjoying a rare position as one of Japan's few translation groups that is neither operated by a for-profit company, nor under the control of any government agency. The group was formed to allow professional translators to help one another, and it is fulfilling that role in some new and exciting ways, not only for its members, but for the profession as a whole.

In addition to monthly meetings and a monthly newsletter, JAT sponsors the honyaku mailing list, an electronic forum enjoyed by more than 600 J-E translators around the world, who avail themselves daily of the list's impressive human resources and blinding response speed. Honyaku is the most active and focused e-mail list of its kind, and answers to tough translation questions routinely come back in a matter of minutes. Typical exchanges on the list involve difficult terminology faced by working professionals who seek advice from colleagues with the experience and knowledge required to deliver convincing solutions. The speed of replies from connected colleagues is made possible in part by the time-zone diversity of list's members; regardless of how late you stay up at night and translate, a colleague on the other side of the globe is likely to have just finished breakfast and be ready to help you with your terminology questions.

In a program to expand its use of cyberspace even further, JAT has also set up a Web site, accessible at <<http://www.jat.org/>>.

Another JAT activity that has become a tradition in the J-E translating profession is the organization of International Japanese/English Translation Conferences. These conferences, the most recent (IJET-7) being held in May 1996 in Yokohama) bring together translators from across the globe in an intense conference environment that just wasn't available before IJETs. The IJET venue alternates between Japan and English-speaking countries, the next one being scheduled for Sheffield, UK in June, 1997.

To find out more about JAT, send e-mail to contact@jat.org, or a fax message to +81-3-3715-2748.

News from Japan (continued from page 34)

usual, while their instruction-manual-translating colleagues were wondering where their next manuscript would come from.

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outside Japan, most of Japan's J-E
translation is done by Japanese writing
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damage repair by foreign rewriters.**

If anything can be learned from the experience of living through the expansion and the collapse of the translation bubble, it might be that good fortune in selecting a field of specialty can be an important factor in surviving the vicissitudes of the translation market.

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