

Translation on the web

Jo Edwards looks at Globalink's new Comprendre site

The final barrier has now been hurdled, according to the hype around the Comprendre real-time translation service offered by Globalink. With the increasing number of translation and lexical resources available on the web, there are no prizes for guessing that this hurdle is language. Globalink is not alone in this quest to break down language barriers - Digital Equipment Corporation currently offers automated electronic mail and Web page translation, and this summer Lernout & Hauspie expects to launch its own Web translation service.

The Comprendre beta test site currently limits users to translation of emails, free of charge, but paying account holders can translate web pages, documents, newsgroups and chat, as well as electronic mail. The service is very much geared towards businesses either looking to expand their market, or simply to improve their services. The languages currently on offer are French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, to or from English, but future languages are expected to include Chinese, Japanese, Russian and, later this year, cross-European pairs - German to and from French, and Spanish to and from Portuguese.

As with many machine translation systems, Comprendre cannot provide text translated with perfect style and grammar, but rather general meaning. Those requiring higher quality translations can use the human translation, available as part of the service. The sound advice from Globalink is to 'think of the computer as someone who doesn't speak your language and write your message accordingly'. The resulting translated document will not be perfect, but it will be comprehensible, and more importantly, it will be fast.

Digital Equipment Corporation's AltaVista Translation Service uses Systran translation software and offers the same languages as the Comprendre system, as well as the same translation facilities, i.e. web page translation etc. Rather than emphasising benefits that this service can bring to businesses, the AltaVista site also promotes the 'lighter' side of machine translation and even encourages the user to have a laugh at the system's expense by typing in idioms or slang that will be difficult for it to translate. Admittedly this is a good cheap gag and will possibly impress colleagues in the office, but it does have a limited shelf life and it is to be hoped that the ultimate

site will be slightly more business oriented.

Both sites have clear instructions on entering concise sentences to make the best use of the system and both are up front about the possible imperfections of the resulting translated text. The speed and accuracy of both sites is impressive with very little to choose between the two in terms of quality. The Comprendre website is very popular and won the Internet Professional Publishers (IPPA) award for Design Excellence in November 1997. The AltaVista Translation Service is also set to become extremely popular as the AltaVista search engine has recently been voted the number one search engine for accuracy of search results and user loyalty in an online survey by leading US market researchers, NPD Group Inc. This and the fact that it has 18 million monthly users, makes it a very attractive translation resource for the user, and will pose a threat to the Comprendre system.

However the newcomer, Coronado (Lernout & Hauspie), will also test the popularity of these sites as it not only offers email and website translation, but also a summarisation service. This added extra will be extremely useful to businesses as it will enable the user to browse through translated summaries of websites before selecting those suitable for entire translation (either by MT or human translation). The initial Coronado languages will be English, German, French and Spanish, to be followed by Dutch, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese. Lernout & Hauspie has recently acquired Applications Technology Inc. (AppTek), a developer of specialised linguistic software; this could lead to future expansions of the languages on offer.

With businesses looking at ways of increasing opportunities for global electronic commerce, web language translation has the potential to be a lucrative source of revenue for Globalink et al. In situations where time is of the essence and only general meaning of a text is required, these services provide a cheap and cheerful alternative to the use of translation companies, where the cost and effort time is likely to be higher. ■

Information on all these services can be found at the following sites -
AltaVista Translations (Digital Equipment Corp) - <http://babelfish.altavista.digital.com/cgi-bin/translate?>
Comprendre translation service (Globalink) - <http://comprendre.globalink.com/>
Coronado (Lernout & Hauspie) - <http://www.lhs.com>