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Current Trends in Translation

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Abstract

Driven by the growth of a global economy and developments in high technology, the process of creating and translating technical documentation has been evolving rapidly. In particular, machine translation (MT) has shown increasing capabilities of efficaciously accomplishing the early stages of the eight stages of translation identified years ago by Robert Bly. As a consequence, translators have learned to use MT as a tool to accelerate their work, but they have also grown wary of MT's potential for replacing them. To ensure steady employment, some translators have begun cross-training as technical writers; correspondingly, a few technical writers have begun cross-training as translators, as the two professions appear to be undergoing a gradual trend of convergence. Academic programs are urged to respond to the evolving trends.

Key words: *automation, computer-assisted, convergence, cross-training, documentation, machine translation (MT), stage, technical writing, translation, trends*

1. Introduction

To anyone in the business of translation, it is obvious that sweeping changes are occurring in the translation of professional documents. To those in the business of technical writing or those who write or study fiction and poetry, the changes may not be quite as obvious, but they are affecting those endeavors nonetheless. These changes are accelerating the process of providing documents, especially technical documents, in multiple language versions (Stejskal 2009). In turn, they are changing the professions of both technical writing and translation and increasingly merging them into one (Gnecchi et al. 2011).

What is prompting these changes? And what is attracting the money that serves to catalyze them? At its essence, it is the demands of the information economy. Firms selling their products and services in countries like Switzerland, Belgium, or Canada have long had to localize and translate for a set number of multiple languages. Now, however, with the trade agreements of the 1990s and resulting expansion in trade to create a truly global marketplace, firms anywhere have an incentive to sell everywhere, and that means adapting their products and services to the local languages and cultures.

Indeed, when we speak of an information economy, much of what we are talking about is information relayed through language—information best understood when it is in the consumer's or client's or reader of literature's own native language.

A quarter century ago, the renowned poet and translator Robert Bly (1983) wrote a book that he titled *The Eight Stages of Translation*. While focused on poetry, the book is instructive in helping us understand current trends in the translation of professional communication. Grouped together, the eight stages constitute the following list:

1. The literal translation
2. The pursuit of problematic detail and ambiguity
3. A re-examination of the literal in light of meanings in the target language
4. Adjusting the target text with an idiomatic ear to the tone of the target language
5. Adjusting the target text with an idiomatic ear turned back to the tone of the source language
6. Attending to the sound patterns apparent in the source language and equivalent in the target language
7. Passing the review of a native speaker of the source language who knows the target language well.
8. Polishing the text with a view to earlier drafts and other translators' versions.

It is now commonly observed (Anderman/Rogers 2003, Hutchins 2004, Pérez 2003, Wagner 2003) that advances in machine translation are allowing computers, using programs like Systran, to give translators a head start by taking a text through the first two translation stages and now even the third. Computer software, like Trados, is helping translators work much more rapidly through the middle stages as well.

Today, translators commonly use controlled language, in which translated phrases have received prior approval as accurate. They employ single-sourcing software to reuse these phrases in new or updated documents. Software for guided authoring or structured authoring helps them insert new phrasing where reused phrases are not yet available or are inappropriate for the context. Achieving full and complete memory is paramount: translation memory is at the heart of automated language translation. To facilitate memory, the translation community is now contending with the need for standards. Indeed, the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA) is at work developing standards for translation memory exchange for document content. With the rapid developments taking place, one has to wonder if, before long, automated language translation will take texts through the first six or even seven of Bly's eight stages, leaving human translators to tinker with the last stage of removing unidiomatic blemishes.

2. A look at where we have come from

Anticipating automated machine translation (MT) of most of Bly's eight stages is nothing new. In 1999, at a symposium on translation studies hosted by the UK's University of Surrey, Mike Shields remarked, "I can see novels being banged out in machine translation systems and handed over to ghost writers to turn them into as good English as is necessary, and completely wipe out translators—and even interpreters" (Anderman/Rogers 2003: 43). Indeed, the speed with which MT technology has been developing is nothing short of remarkable, when viewed on the scale of human history. By the earliest years of the 21st century, the European Commission—one of the largest volume users of translations—had already prescribed which genres of documents would be subject to MT and to what degree. Wagner (2003: 98) describes how the purpose of a document determined the process for translation at the European Commission. Legislation, for example, warranted "human translation + revision essential," whereas basic understanding called for "machine translation if available," while documents "for information" received "unrevised human translation or post-edited machine translation." Wagner defines "basic understanding" as "rough translation, usually for one person, to permit understanding of content. Will not be published." She defines "for information" as "accurate translation for internal informational purposes. Will not be published." Thus, definitions are determined by estimated number of users and by breadth of distribution. Such identifications and accompanying procedures were not confined to large governmental entities such as the EC. At this same time, Pérez (2003) found that, throughout industry, Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT), in the form of translation memories, terminology management systems, and machine translation, was "used at different stages of the translation process, depending, on the requirements called for by the translation job: type of text and the possibility of reusing previous translations, target text quality required by the client…or consistency in the use of terms across different translations" (191). CAT had by now expanded into the "multilingual workflow system" in which "Translation is…an essential part of the *information cycle*" (192), resulting in a shift toward "controlled translation" (193) in which translators are parts of teams developing "language technology" (194).

That such trends would only strengthen and continue seems inevitable, especially when one examines the forces driving them. Hutchins (2004: 1) lists six reasons why MT will become more widespread:

1. "…there is just too much that needs to be translated…"
2. "…technical materials are too boring for human translators…"
3. "…terminology [needs to be] used consistently…"
4. "…the use of computer-based translation tools can increase the volume and speed of translation throughput…"
5. "…top quality human translation is not always needed."
6. "…companies want to reduce translation costs…"

Of these, the last is the most forceful. As the president of Prisma International, a prominent translation and technical documentation company in Minneapolis put it, "the real change will be forced by the $$ belt tighteners [budget cutters]" (Thomson 2009). Both translators and technical writers have found themselves adjusting their approaches and procedures in what can be seen as an attempt to integrate human translators with the emerging technology of MT. As a consequence, note Raído/Austermühl (2003: 248), "The advent of the information age has sustainably altered the profession of translation, especially with regard to the type of electronic tools used, the type of texts translated, and the types of skills needed by today's translators and localizers." As examples, O'Hagan/Ashworth (2002: 11) cite online editions of magazines and daily newspapers, with articles that are often shorter than in print and that are updated frequently, thus "demanding a shorter timeframe for translation, and with a wider native-speaker audience," as well as e-books "published exclusively on the Internet" and "likely to reduce the time available for the translation process." Other examples that they cite include product documentation and audio-visual subtitles. In each case, demand for translation in shorter and shorter amounts of time drives the increased use of MT.

Despite, or perhaps even because of, the automation of MT, the stages left for human translators to complete can have the effect of heightening the value of the human element, namely creativity. Risku (2002) observes that

> Translation is a highly creative, situation-specific activity and this means it is extremely flexible. Translators create a means of communicating in a specific target situation….Translation can be seen as a problem-solving process in which the communication expert is part of a complex, dynamic system with various cultural, communicative, situative and professional aspects.

This view stands in contrast to the one that translators have historically held, particularly in regard to translation of technical documents. In this view, as Venuti (2008: 274) describes it, "They are likely to feel that translation is basically a practical activity which requires little more than a knowledge of a foreign language and an elegant writing style, certainly not any immersion in translation studies or any familiarity with translation theory." However, as we shall see in the next section, more and more translators and, to a slower degree, technical writers are coming to terms with their changing role as MT evolves and takes over some of the early stages completed in the past by translators.

3. A look at where we may be going

Despite the remarkable developments in MT and the translation process, further improvements to MT seem all the more daunting as one moves farther down Bly's list of stages. The human judgement and wisdom required at these stages, rooted as they

often are in social and cultural knowledge, seem complex to the point that they do not fit with ease into the flow charts of computer programming. Nevertheless, the forces that Hutchins (2004) lists above continue to motivate industry to forge ahead with MT. As Pérez (2003) observes,

> …from the industry's point of view, complete mechanization of translation can only be possible through absolute predictability, that is to say, by turning language into a *static* object and reducing dynamic change into static structure….machines have begun to construct a bridge from the translator's intelligence to the translator's practice.

The current drawbacks to this relentless drive are apparent to anyone who has had to rely on an MT text, even with light "post-editing," as it has been termed: "Generally [users] expect high quality (equivalent to that of human translators), but what they usually get is low quality" (Hutchins 2004: 15). Dillinger (2012: 20) stresses that MT "does not really *translate*; it only help us reuse words and segments that have already been translated. That's it." (Emphasis in original) The EC's table determining proportions of MT + human translation may be indicative of the scenario that we are likely to see well into the future. Hutchins (2004: 17) elaborates,

> …we are not going to get MT systems that can take *any* text in *any* subject and produce *unaided* a good translation. Literature, philosophy, sociology, law and any other areas of interest which are highly culture-dependent are beyond the scope of MT. It is true now, and will probably always be true. (Emphasis in original)

Translators may be quick to concur with Hutchins's observation, but industry managers—especially those with little familiarity of translation or even a working knowledge of a second language—may be slow or even reluctant to accept it, because of human translators' much higher cost and slower speed. Indeed, this gets at the crux of the issue, as Bowker (2003: 221) notes:

> Striking a balance between quality and quantity is one of the greatest challenges faced by translators in the 21st century….the increase in volume has been accompanied by an increase in pressure on translators to work more quickly (while still maintaining high quality, of course!) in order to reduce the time-to-market of a global product.

As Gnecchi et al. (2011) found in their surveys, many translators have grown increasingly aware and anxious of machines taking over their jobs, while more and more technical writers have likewise grown increasingly aware and anxious of translators encroaching on technical writers' jobs by becoming cross-trained. As high technology developments change the roles of both professions, the resulting tensions

come into sharp focus. It is worthwhile to examine the details at length in Pérez's (2003: 193-194) acute observation:

> …the professional has to deal with two tensions. On the one hand, the intellectual act of translation remains the same and the translator still has to activate cognitive processes to turn raw intellectual capacities into behaviour patterns that work in a complex universe in order to process and interpret information. On the other, the industry expects the translator to work in a global team, to accommodate his work to the latest technology, to put into practice the most advanced electronic publishing techniques, to understand the intricacies of translation software tools, to create and manage terminology databases and to keep the pace with market requirements. The moment translation is no longer an isolated activity in the production process, the translator needs to retain full control of the different tasks and tools involved in translation so that interaction between the human and the machine is felt as a natural process. In order to ease this tension, the translator has to take on a central role and find a way to manage creativity and technology with a sound business practice.

Wresting some semblance of control, while working in tandem with the machine, emerges as professional communicators' chief challenge.

One can sense the precarious position and resulting anxiety that translators increasingly feel, in the presidential column of Jiri Stejskal (2009: 7) to the membership of the American Translators Association (ATA) in in the January 2009 issue of *The ATA Chronicle*. His purpose was clearly to put members at ease and to show them a brighter future:

> While there are many examples of translation errors caused by human translators, these pale in comparison with the errors of machine translation. And when an erring human combines with an erring machine, an amazing thing happens: the translation takes on a life of its own and the end result turns out to have no relation to the source text….However, it would be foolish to dismiss machine translation completely. When a sophisticated machine translation application is used with competence for a specific purpose, it can yield remarkable results. As an example, some Barcelona dailies are published simultaneously in Spanish and Catalan. This is achieved through machine translation that, thanks to the similar structure and vocabulary of the two languages, requires minimum post-editing. Does this mean that human translators will soon be replaced by sophisticated software? This was a question posed at the recent conference of the Association for Machine Translation in the Americas (www.amtaweb.org). The answer was a resounding

> "NO." …machine translation fills an entirely new space that overlaps with the human translation space to only a very insignificant degree. In fact, it can be argued that machine translation creates more work for human translators.

More work for human translators would indeed be welcome, particularly as 2009 saw the teetering and near total collapse of the global economy and the manufacturing and production that require translated materials. In the meantime, translators are securing employment by expanding their repertoire of skills and performing tasks that used to be viewed as falling into the domain of other professionals. Raído/Austermühl (2003: 229) observe, "As experts for intercultural technical communication, modern translators often double as technical writers, lexicographers, software testers, or cultural consultants." The surveys conducted in both Europe and North America by Gnecchi et al. (2011) bear out that translators are doubling as technical writers in particular. In a pattern of professional convergence, technical writers, especially in Europe, are increasingly seeking out cross-training so that they serve as translators. (Anglophile aversion to foreign language learning in the U.S. and Canada appears to be dampening such a trend there, except among those technical writers who have grown up bilingual.)

With a view to such convergence, one might expect that academic programs would respond with curricula that offer such cross-training. Raído/Austermühl (2003: 249) call for reform: "With regard to preparing translation students, for the professional realities of technical translation and localization, we recommend specialized curricular modules based on […] localization tool, text, and process typology…." However, on both sides of the Atlantic, Gnecchi et al.'s (2011) survey respondents said that formal translation/technical writing cross-training was virtually nil. As one North American respondent remarked, "I acquired these competencies through self-directed study in the workforce." A few academic programs have been taking steps to make cross-training a reality. For example, Université Paris—Denis Diderot now includes courses in technical writing in the fourth and fifth year of its bachelor's degree program for translators. For its part, the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee offers a graduate certificate in international technical communication, within which students can be certified to translate French, German, or Spanish primarily or other languages by petition. The program draws heavily on courses offered as well by the English Department in its Master of Arts degree, which includes an optional concentration in professional writing. A parallel master's degree at the University of Washington in Seattle is offered in technical Japanese. Such examples of translation/technical writing cross-training are few, however, despite urgings from professionals for more.

4. Conclusions

What is driving both the trend toward increased translation and the trend to automate and accelerate is the economy part of the information economy. Translation leads to

better understanding, which leads to increased customer satisfaction, which leads to increased sales. Automation, along with its lubricant, standardization, saves costs. While the cost-effectiveness of automation has long been clearly the case in agriculture or industry, only now is it becoming fully clear to those engaged in language production. It remains to be seen to what extent the trends identified will continue or level off in affecting accuracy of meaning, efficiencies of production, and, inevitably, employment of translators. For his part, Jost Zetzsche (2012: 31, 33), reflecting on the latest advances in MT technology, writes to his fellow translators that "we have the opportunity to step out of the shadows and engage with the general public."

We can say for the foreseeable future that the trends will likely continue to accelerate. As they do, professional communicators, including both technical writers and translators, will need to weigh the cost savings of automation with the linguistic accuracy that to this point only humans can ultimately render and judge. Cost and accuracy: Whatever the language, whatever the document, professional communicators aim to have less cost and more accuracy. The information economy demands both.

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