GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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Better a Bottle in Front of Me Than a Frontal Lobotomy?

I had a number of interesting on- and off-line conversations about machine translation (MT) post-editing this past week. For the uninitiated, MT post-editing refers to the editing of MT output (and possibly helping the MT engine do a better job next time around). This can be done on your own volition (because you might feel that it increases your productivity if you do—and according to a good number of responses that I received, many are doing this) or at the wish of a client. The MT engine can be a generic program (such as Google Translate or Microsoft Translator) or one that your client has customized. The nature of the underlying engine can also differ. It could be a statistically based MT engine (such as Asia Online or an engine based on the open-source Moses project) or it could be a rules-based MT engine (such as ProMT or Systran).

But despite the fact that there are so many variables, we tend to be very categorical. Whenever we encounter something that has the potential of relevance to us, we seem to feel the need to place it into categories of good or bad. Crowdsourcing? Terrible. Machine translation? Pathetic. Riding lawnmowers? Evil.

Now, how many of you have been directly and negatively affected by either MT or crowdsourcing? And I do not mean as a consumer—most of us have been affected on that level—but as a professional translator. I would be surprised if we are talking about more than a couple percent, if that. Still, we feel very strongly about it. Case in point: Last week I talked to a friend, a very experienced and successful translator, who told me that he is thinking about opening a completely different business just to make sure that once MT takes over he still has a leg to stand on. And he was not even kidding!

These past few days I have been talking with various colleagues about what, if anything, needs to be done to train MT post-editors. And those conversations have made me understand a great deal more.

There is a lot of hype. Yes, commercial, productive use of MT is happening in some very specific areas: companies with a need for VERY large amounts of translated data that would likely not be translated otherwise, such as Microsoft or Symantec; companies that try to make a point (like the non-English, machine-translated help for Google Translator Toolkit); the military, which probably acts more as a financier than an actual power user (but if it is true, you and I will never know about it…); and a good number of companies and organizations that are gearing up for a greater use of MT. (The member list of the TAUS Data Association (TDA) might give you a good starting point to see who is interested, at least in statistically based MT.) Eventually, there will also be a greater number of language services providers (LSPs) offering customized MT services (many of those already doing so are also on TDA's member list), especially those that work for large clients with a lot of existing data. And all this will grow.

Now, I might have written almost the same statement four or five years ago. Clearly things are moving a lot slower than many anticipated, despite the huge amount of coverage devoted to MT in the news media and the very widespread private use of services like Google Translate, etc. Still, for some of us, post-editing might become a field in which we could choose to work if it matches our interest and expertise.

It is sometimes said that post-editing MT is like editing fuzzy matches from translation memory (TM). I do not think that is quite true.

The fuzzy matches you receive from a traditional TM are terminologically and syntactically "correct" (if not, it is time to clean your or the client's TM), but they are just not quite the right matches for the current source segment. You do not have any problem understanding the fuzzy match on its own merit (after all, you or a colleague authored it) and can decide relatively quickly whether it makes sense to correct the match or start from scratch.

It is also different from the assembly process that some translation environment tools (TEnTs) provide, in which your translation is pieced together from subsegments in the terminology database or TM. Assembled segments follow the syntax of the source segment and are very helpful as reliable sources for terminology, but relatively rarely as likely sources for a finished translation.

What is also very different—and maybe this is the most important point—is the goal of the translation, the usability factor. Often, if there is MT involved, especially when dictated by the client, the famous triangle of quality versus cost versus turnaround time is shifted toward cost and turnaround time, making a selective edit the primary goal for the post-editor.

In a talk with Mike Dillinger of the Association for Machine Translation in the Americas (AMTA), who has been involved with training post-editors, he stressed the prioritization factor he tries to teach his students. The critical question is "How much editing is enough?" What is the acceptable level of usability for this to be a "successful" translation?

Now, is it a translator who needs to do this or are we talking about a completely new profession here? I think there will be a new profession at some point, but that point depends on ➡

Founded in 1982, the

Argentine Association of Translators and Interpreters (AATI) is a nonprofit organization. With a base of over 200 members active in a broad range of translation and interpreting fields and language combinations, AATI represents language professionals residing in Argentina and abroad.

Mission

- To protect and represent the interests of literary, scientific, and technical translators and interpreters.

- To promote the professional development of its members.

- To encourage cooperation and the sharing of knowledge with other professional and educational associations.

- To disseminate translation and interpreting news and related activities.

Activities

- Organizes continuing education courses and seminars.

- Actively engages in forums and events advocating for the profession.

- Offers an online translator and interpreter search tool and directory.

- Provides members with a job posting service, professional advice, and a monthly newsletter.

- Hosts an active Sign Language Division.

Memberships and Affiliations

AATI is a member of the International Federation of Translators, the Regional Centre Latin America, and the Argentine Federation of Translators. AATI also actively collaborates with other international associations, such as the Spanish Language Professionals Association. Many of its members are also members of ATA and of other international professional associations.

Quick Facts

- **Established:** 1982
- **Website:** www.aati.org.ar
- **E-mail:** info@aati.org.ar

Additional Information

For more information, please visit www.aati.org.ar.

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ATA's chapters and its affiliates, along with other groups, serve translators and interpreters, providing them with industry information, networking opportunities, and support services. This column is designed to serve as a quick resource highlighting the valuable contributions these organizations are making to the profession.

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the quality of the MT output. The more unreliable the output, the greater the need for translation skills. But again, those skills differ from what we are used to in our TEnT-driven lives, and we will need to acquire those skills.

I think it is intriguing to see who will jump into this future opening of providing MT post-editing training. It will be up to conferences like the AMTA this year in Denver or LSPs that work on MT projects to train their translators. But there is no doubt that at some point there will be more formalized training.

One area in which training will play an important role in honing translators' skills further is in enhancing the quality of the existing MT. This is especially relevant with rules-based MT engines or, for that matter, any MT system that can more or less directly handle input. (For example, with Asia Online, a statistically based MT engine, the changes will not be visible immediately, but they will be visible after a weekly scheduled update.) The goal for MT developers in this case must be to gratify the post-editor with immediate or very quick learning by the MT engine so that errors have to be corrected only once.

If you are just not interested in an opportunity like that then you are firmly aligned with the vast majority of professional translators. Some might be swayed at some point, many will not, but do you know what? There will be plenty of work for both groups. And my friend who thought about starting a new business? Nothing against opening a new business, but MT will not make it a necessity. I am confident that he and most of us with the necessary translation skills will be around doing what we are trained to do for a long time to come.

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