GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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A New Specimen

The other day a representative of a language services provider called up to question me about translators and their use of machine translation (MT). I was a tad puzzled about the phone call, but I tried to make the best of it. As I hemmed and hawed with my answers, however, I realized how little information we actually have on this topic.

The representative's first question was about the percentage of professional translators using MT. His focus was on "normal projects"—those projects that were not originally set up with the express goal of using MT.

The short answer: I do not know, and I am not sure that anyone does. But there are signs to indicate that use by translators is certainly increasing. One telltale sign is that virtually all translation environment tools now include the Google Translate (or Microsoft Bing Translator) add-in. Many also link to other MT engines as well, including desktop-based, customizable versions of tools like Systran and PROMT.

Of course, just because "it's there" does not mean that it is being used. Some language combinations lend themselves to MT more than others. For instance, I would bet that a higher percentage of Swedish→English translators use MT than German→English translators because of the greater morphological similarity between Swedish and English. And some kinds of translatable texts are more suitable than others: with software strings you might have a much higher "success" rate than with complex medical or technical texts. With all these variables, I would venture to guess that around 20% of all professional translators belong to that relatively new specimen that uses MT to pretranslate. (I would be thrilled if someone had some actual statistics to correct or substantiate this.)

The language services provider representative's follow-up question was even more interesting: Should translators have to disclose that they are using MT? I have an easy one-word answer to that: No. Of course not. I was happy to hear that the representative agreed we should not have to volunteer that information.

We are selling a product, not a process. While it is true that our clients are defining the process ever more closely for many projects, it is still the product—our translation—for which we are paid. Now, if it becomes obvious to our clients that we have used certain processes—such as translation memory, voice recognition, MT, or any others—that have had a detrimental effect on the quality of our products, or if we have not used certain processes—such as specific glossaries, style guides, or even spell-checkers—to help ensure the necessary quality, then there is a problem that we will have to address. But if we deliver a product that matches the quality criteria articulated in the job description, it is up to us how we got there.

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ATA Certification Exam Information

Upcoming Exams

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Registration Deadline:
October 12, 2012

Michigan
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August 4, 2012
Registration Deadline:
July 20, 2012

New Mexico
Albuquerque
September 15, 2012
Registration Deadline:
August 31, 2012

Texas
Austin
July 21, 2012
Registration Deadline:
July 6, 2012

Utah
Provo
September 8, 2012
Registration Deadline:
August 24, 2012

Argentina
Buenos Aires
August 11, 2012
Registration Deadline:
July 27, 2012

Mexico
Guadalajara
September 22, 2012
Registration Deadline:
September 7, 2012