



GeekSpeak

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Talking Points

When we talk about what we do and who we are, we generally have one thing really going for us: we are passionate about what we do. Sure, we are frustrated sometimes about the monotony of large jobs or the poor pay or the low status that we think translators have, but when it comes down to it, we love language and we love our work. Some of us are better at communicating that passion to outsiders than others, but the vast majority of us are really bad at talking about one thing: machine translation. We hem and haw and we do not really know what to say. What is the problem here? There is hardly any conversation where it does not come up—after all, that is what people are hearing about in the media all the time, right?

With this in mind, I thought it would be helpful to start gathering some talking points that might make us a little more self-assured in how we talk about machine translation. In my opinion, here are two pillars that can form the cornerstones of our discussions:

Machine translation is great because it fulfills an important purpose for the average consumer. Machine translation provides a gist (or approximated) translation that quite often

offers a pretty good idea of the content of any given webpage, e-mail, or tweet. You and I know this is true because we have all used it for exactly that purpose. It is also important to recall that this is especially true for language communities with less general access to data in their language (if they happen to belong to one of the 66 languages currently supported between Google Translate and Bing Translator).

Machine translation is a completely different activity than that performed by translators. Human translation, like any human activity, is not guaranteed to be successful, but with the right processes in place, the likelihood of success is extremely high. Contrast that with translation by a computer: if the machine translation system works well, the likelihood of success is exactly as great as the mathematical probability that the computer can apply. Think about how communication works. Is it always based on the logic of math? No, it is based on the

context of circumstance and text—something that only a translator can follow or recreate.

There are plenty of points to be made that fall between these cornerstones, from the powerful ways machine translation can be used for large-scale text analysis purposes to the impact of a constant barrage of sub-par machine-translated texts on the language sensibilities of the average consumer. But what is important for us is to present ourselves and our profession confidently when it comes to the topic of machine translation. If we do not do it, who will? And tellingly, it is these very discussions that can lead to plenty of translation and consulting opportunities connected with questions of machine translation. So do not be caught unprepared. Assemble those lucid and compelling talking points for your next elevator pitch or cocktail party or sales call, and be prepared to shine as the undisputed expert on machine translation.

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The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost is the co-author of Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World, a perfect source for replenishing your arsenal of information on how human translation and machine translation each play important parts in the broader world of translation.



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Federal Bureau of Investigation
The Internet Crime
Complaint Center
www.ic3.gov

National White
Collar Crime Center
www.nw3c.org