

Machine Translation and the Anxieties of Technology

Machine translation tops the list of hot topics in the translation and localization industry today - echoes of the concerns surrounding this issue can be heard around the world. What does machine translation mean for the future of the language industry? How will it affect how we work? Does it effectively signal the linguist's absolute demise?

Machine translation has been on the tips of the tongues of most language business professionals for quite some time now. Surrounded by undertones of a general human anxiety surrounding technology, it has been met with skepticism and insecurity.



Of course, all technological advancements bring with them a mix of sentiments, especially when it comes to labor and livelihood. Many workers, blue collar and white collar alike, are faced with the issue of technology at one time or another. It seems that it is now the language professionals' turn.

Machine translation by no means signals the end of the linguist, but it will most likely result in some change – a reality that has been met with opposing views. A cloud of doubt surrounds the question of how the future will take shape.

At the time being, the shifts taking place related to machine translation are largely geared towards post-editing.

As opposed to traditional editing, machine translation post-editing often requires a significant amount of heavy lifting. And while machine translation has come a long way in the past few years and continues to improve, it is by no means a perfect substitute for human work. Sentence structures may be awkward and even nonsensical, and it is not uncommon for words to be translated in a way that is entirely unrelated to context.

Such imperfections have led many language industry professionals to take a reluctant

approach to machine translation. At Win & Winnow, however, we have decided to embrace it. Assuming an open posture accompanied with a critical eye, we have worked to hone our skills in the area of machine translation post-editing and hope that it will bring about new horizons for the company.

To date, we have post-edited millions of words in Spanish, English, Portuguese, German, French and Italian. We have dealt with a variety of industries, from IT to corporate communications and beyond. Working with both light and complex post-editing, we understand the intricacies involved as well as the importance of comprehending the final purpose of the documentation at hand.

In projects where the final product is meant for internal purposes – customer surveys, for example – we have found light post-editing to be sufficient, where linguists concentrate on meaning but not necessarily style. Complex post-editing, which is the best fit for documentation meant for publication, is a different type of challenge, for it often requires more than one round of review. We understand, however, that there is no set formula that will fit each and every case. We also acknowledge that as technology continues to change and improve, post-editing work in general will evolve.

To that end, we have found that success depends largely upon the quality of the original machine-translated content, especially when the issue of time is at hand. For this reason, we find it paramount to work towards the improvement of machine translation technology overall, for the contribution of each player will be a vital aspect of its development.

Upon request, we provide an in-depth analyses of the productivity and efficiency of human translation as opposed to machine translation and post-editing. Our post-editing team is also available to provide general reviews of machine-translated output, noting habitual errors, concordance issues in gender, numbers and words, and questions of context-related terminology. Our goal here is to contribute to the advancement of the technology overall.

Like it or not, machine translation is here to stay. And while post-editing, for the time being, seems to be at least one important facet of its development, there is no way to tell exactly what the future will hold.

Here at Win & Winnow, we believe that it is something worth approaching in a global manner, accepting and digesting the human anxieties that are bound to come with any technological change.

We look forward to continuing to participate in the conversation on machine translation, reflecting on the past and present and looking towards the future.