



# Thinking About Machine Translation

Jeff Allen

As I have read over the language technology focused articles presented in this supplement, several points of debate seem to be raised. This overview offers a few questions to highlight points that I think readers should think about.

### 1. Defining Quality

There has been discussion about good versus bad translation quality, yet I would like readers to think about whether translation quality is a simple binary formula, if there is a spectrum of levels, and/or if one can easily determine correctness of translation. Is "translation" a single-type and single-approach process, or are there some approaches that are more appropriate or less appropriate for different types of translation types and needs?

The translators and translation agencies whom I know all claim that they produce high-quality translations. The word quality in this field has various meanings with regard to what it applies to. The concept of the word quality is relative to the customer requirements and expectations, the time constraints of the project, the target register of language and style, the technical accuracy, etc. Geoff Kingscott published a good summary article entitled "Translation Quality Assessment: An Overview" in the May 20, 2003 issue of the LISA newsletter ([www.lisa.org/archive\\_domain/newsletters/2003/2.4/kingscott.htm](http://www.lisa.org/archive_domain/newsletters/2003/2.4/kingscott.htm)). Translation quality and appropriateness can only be determined by evaluation of a translated product (text or voice) based on the input criteria and factors, not simply by the surface presentation of products.

### 2. Developers' Promises

One of the articles addresses the promises made by MT developers. It is true that some promises in the past by MT promoters have been utopian, such as MT with no need of Postediting (cf. MultiLingual Computing & Technology Volume 5, Issue 2) which resulted in a change in perspective a few

years later on the same project. Yet, have these promises in the past been only marketing and sales oriented, or was a part of responsibility borne by the user institutions that possibly inadequately identified, analyzed, and presented their real needs to the MT companies? What about cases where an MT user institution purchases a tool for one type of need such an inbound content gisting but then later decides to use it for a completely different need such as an outbound translation for publication. Who is really at fault in such a situation? The tool vendor, the customer, or both?

### 3. Source of Failures

Have the failures of MT implementation been solely due to the the software/systems, or were there external factors and third-party application problems? Was task planning and human resource allocation adequate and appropriate for such projects? Were there issues of implemented third-party tools that had not been part of the original strategy or were changes made along the way that substituted some external tools for others, and resulted in system incompatibility issues.

### 4. Integration

Deploying language technology systems is just one step. Integrating them into task workflows with human translators requires good training that helps transition the users from the previous workflow to the new one. Have there been adequate training courses on MT over the years? If they have existed, did the MT user organizations order such training for their own users, or did they decide to do without such training and invent the user training and mentoring process themselves? In such conditions, who is at fault for the failure of the project?

### 5. Customer Knowledge

Should we expect inbound-translation content-gisting users to know the source

language and choose the appropriate MT engine whereas automatic language identification techniques have been developed, tested, and publicly presented over the past several years? Content gisting assumes that the users don't know how to read the source language, so should we even expect them to even know what language it is? This is important given that only 1,000 or so of the 6,500 languages in the world today have a written form. Consider automatic language identification work by Philip Resnik ([www.umi.acs.umd.edu/~resnik/strand/](http://www.umi.acs.umd.edu/~resnik/strand/)) and by AppTek ([www.apptek.com](http://www.apptek.com)).

### 6. Tracking Statistics

We have seen one article on the comparison of translation speed via two different translation workflow channels. Yet, how many translation departments and translation agencies keep track of translation statistics which can be used to benchmark their human-tasks productivity against translation software implementation efforts? How are translation organizations keeping track of their translation productivity?

### 7. Cause or Effect?

Are translation software providers creating products that integrate into an existing workflow process or are they creating products that completely modify the existing one? How are current experienced translators involved in defining the specifications of the software and evaluating it?

### 8. Semantic Web

Is the Semantic Web with proposals of XML-based metadata schemes something that can be really be achieved in the next few years, or are the data sources so diverse and non-standardized that such a large-scale effort will be very slow? Also, is the mention of XML really an added value today, or is it just a marketing idea and sales pitch?

I hope that these several questions will give readers something to think about.  $\Omega$