## Translate Server Error

# In translation, to err is

not necessarily human. While there are many examples of translation errors caused by human translators, these pale in comparison with the errors of machine translation. And when an erring human combines with an erring machine, an amazing thing happens: the translation takes on a life of its own and the end result turns out to have no relation to the source text. In China, for example, a restaurateur eager to attract an international clientele decided to display the restaurant's name on the storefront in English as well as Chinese. Alas, since he spoke no English himself, he had no way of knowing that the machine translation application he chose to perform the task was not working at the moment, and his restaurant now proudly bears the English name "Translate server error."

This is an example of the incompetent use of rudimentary machine translation (even the error message is in incorrect English). However, it would be foolish to dismiss machine translation completely. When a sophisticated machine translation application is used with competence for a specific purpose, it can yield remarkable results. As an example, some Barcelona dailies are published simultaneously in Spanish and in Catalan. This is achieved through machine translation that, thanks to the similar structure and vocabulary of the two languages, requires minimum post-editing. Does this mean that human translators will soon be replaced by sophisticated software? This was a question posed at the recent conference of the Association

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for Machine Translation in the Americas (www.amtaweb.org). The answer was a resounding "NO."

Taken together, machine translation and human translation do not create a zero-sum proposition. In other words, more machine translation does not result in less human translation. We are not reliving the industrial revolution, when machines replaced human laborers. Rather, machine translation fills an entirely new space that overlaps with the human translation space to only a very insignificant degree. In fact, it can be argued that machine translation creates more work for human translators.

Machine translation also creates an entirely new line of work for an emerging breed of machine translation post-editors. It is understood that professional translators are not likely to engage en masse in post-editing of translated text generated by a machine—this will be done by indi-

viduals with a different skill set. Professional translators will continue to do what they do best: translate.

Machine translation makes it possible to process large amounts of material that would otherwise not be possible to translate at all for economic and other reasons. The limitation of such translation is well-known and is also acknowledged by the machine translation community. However, is it not better for people in Uzbekistan to gain access to the content on the Internet via garbled "Google Uzbek" than to have no access at all because they do not speak English? Or for the Thais to have the more than two and a half million English Wikipedia entries available to them in less-than-perfect Thai instead of just a few hundred entries entered by native Thai speakers?

The translation landscape is changing. Like it or not, machine translation is here to stay and we should pay attention and find ways to make the best of it. Let us view it not as a threat, but as an opportunity.

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## Iraqi Interpreter Mask Ban Lifted

In November, ATA President Jiri Stejskal wrote Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to oppose the decision banning Iraqi interpreters working for U.S. troops from protecting their identities by wearing ski masks (see November/December issue, page 11). On December 6, the BBC reported that the Pentagon had rescinded the ban. For the complete story, please go to http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7768041.stm.