



TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEATURE ARTICLES

Machine Translation
Front Page

Hawaii's Interpreters
Take Action
Front Page

Interpreter as
Expert Witness
Page 3

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Message
from the Chair
Page 2

Board Meeting
Minutes
Page 12

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Northwest Regional
Page 5

ATA Seminar
Page 5

EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR'S CORNER
Page 7

ITEMS OF INTEREST
Page 7

MEMBERS IN ACTION
Page 8

DIFFICULTIES AND LIMITATIONS OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

Guillermo Cabanellas de las Cuevas

If machines have replaced humans in countless activities — serving sodas, driving airplanes, teaching children — why can't they also produce translations? A dictionary, after all, appears to be perfectly apt for automation. Feed words in one language into a computer, apply the right software and — presto — a translation machine would be at your fingertips. Machines would do the work and human beings would carry on with other aspects of their lives. No more endless nights for translators, struggling with repetitive legal texts or obscure technical documents. With computerized and electronic dictionaries already on the market, machine translation would only imply extending the mechanics of these dictionaries to more complex texts, right?

Before this dream (or nightmare?) becomes a reality, a few difficulties would have to be overcome. First, the ambiguity problem. A quick look at any bilingual dictionary shows that many words in any given language have more than one equivalent in another language. For example, the Spanish word *vela* — famous for its ambiguity — means a candle, a sail, the act of taking care (*él vela por sus hijos*), and is equivalent to the expression “see her” (*vela tendida en la hierba*), and so on. A human being would solve these ambiguities by looking to the context in which the word is used. Then it would be clear that the expression *se apagó la vela* refers to a candle, and *se alzó la vela* to a sail. Solving such contextual problems would require software decidedly

> continued on page 16

HAWAII'S INTERPRETERS TAKE ACTION TWENTY YEARS AND NO PAY RAISE

M. Alohalani Boido and Patricia J. Harpstrite

With many of Hawaii's experienced interpreters no longer able to afford to work in the state courts, Hawaii may face a shortage of qualified interpreters in the future. The Hawaii judiciary, which has not raised the minimum court interpreter pay for two decades, received a hand-delivered petition in September signed by 64 freelance interpreters.

Hawaii's courts are all state courts, organized into four circuits. Each circuit has district (misdemeanor), family, and circuit (felony) courts. Each type of court within each circuit has its own interpreter assignment procedures. Rates are \$50/half-day for hearings and trials, and \$40/half-day for all other court proceedings.

> continued on page 14

MACHINE TRANSLATION

continued from page 1

more powerful than what is currently used for machine or computer translations of isolated words.

A second difficulty relates to the detection and translation of meanings which do not derive from a single word but rather from a variable set of words. This is not a problem exclusive to poetic or literary texts. Take the Spanish sentence: *Numerosos conflictos jalonan el desarrollo del Derecho*. *Jalonan* comes from the verb *jalonar*, which literally means “to mark with range poles.” Obviously the above sentence has nothing to do with range poles; its translation is more like: “The development of a legal system is marked by many conflicts.” The meaning of *jalonan* in this context is derived not only from an isolated sentence but from the context in which the word is used. Last, but certainly not least, most dictionaries — and our hypothetical translating machine — are based on the idea that words in one language have an equivalent in another language. This idea, in turn, is based on the premise that the conceptual system’s underlying different languages are identical. But this premise is not always true.

Take mathematics. Translation between English and Spanish is normally easy — once one is familiar with the jargon of mathematics — because of the very strong correlation between English and Spanish mathematical concepts. Thus, the English “sine” is equivalent to the Spanish *seno* (translating *seno* into English, however, would create interesting ambiguity problems for a machine); “matrix” is *matriz* (with ambiguities of its own), etc. Where a conceptual correlation does not exist, simple translations become impossible. Thus, e.g., a *vara* is a linear measure equivalent to 86.6 centimeters; there is no simple equivalent in English for this measure. A “stone” is a weight measure equivalent to 14 pounds; Spanish has no specific word for this unit of weight.

The problem of non-identical conceptual frameworks is particularly severe in the area of legal terminology. Legal systems based on Roman law differ fundamentally from legal systems based on English law. Thus, the distinction between law and equity has no equivalent under Roman law systems, and as a result, whole families of words and expressions have no equivalent under Roman law systems: for example, “equitable remedies,” “equitable defenses,” “action at law,” “suit in equity,” and so on. Similarly, many words in Spanish such as *amparo* and *censo enfitéutico*, or expressions in other European languages do not have a precise equivalent in English because such concepts do not exist under English or Anglo-Saxon-based legal systems.

Translation between languages without similar underlying conceptual constructs is a difficult enterprise even for human translators. Often, overcoming such difficul-

ties is more an art than a science. In one context a *censo enfitéutico* may be translated as “annuity,” but this translation will fail if we are trying to inform the English reader about what *censo enfitéutico* exactly means (an annuity contract made in exchange for use of land). Solving these problems by means of computers requires a stage in the development of artificial intelligence that, to my knowledge, has not yet been reached.

Some Famous Problems in the History of Translation

Translation history has its moments of glory and disgrace. Some examples from history may shed light on the potential of machine translation. One of the most famous titles in Western literature is Proust’s *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. This creates no special problems for translation into Spanish, since French and Spanish share a similar idiom: *jeunes filles en fleurs/muchachas en flor*. Hence, the Spanish translation of this title is: *A la sombra de las muchachas en flor*.

English has no comparable idiom. “Budding girl,” or “girl in full blossom,” or “flowering girl” give an idea of what is meant, but are not familiar expressions.

An additional problem is posed by *à l’ombre*. “In the shadow” is too somber. “Under the shade” conveys an idea of physical protection but is inappropriate to the context of the book.

English translators came up with “Within a Budding Grove,” perhaps a nihilistic response to the difficulties posed by Proust’s title. Since the direct translation is difficult, the title was basically reconceived. The book might as well be about Sequoia National Park. The girls are gone, the flowers are gone, and we are left with some vegetable buds. Needless to say, this solution has not made Proust aficionados happy.

I certainly don’t have a solution for this famous problem (“Under the Shade of Girls in Full Blossom?” “A Bouquet of Young Flowers?”). But a machine would miss much of the information that would allow a human translator to do a better job in these cases: the context provided by the book as a whole, the connotations of *fleurs*, and other factors would be weighed by the translator before choosing a solution.

Another famous debate revolved around the translation of Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Once again, translation into Spanish was relatively straightforward and uncontested: *El malestar en la cultura*. Translation into English, however, presented several immediate difficulties. *Unbehagen* may refer to either a physical or a spiritual ill-being. Freud in his work was referring to spiritual problems. But there is no exact equivalent in English for spiritual ill-being. As to *Kultur*, the immediate translation is “culture,” but German culture carried on a long debate as to the distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, a con-

trovency without parallel in literature in English.

The translated title in English was "Civilization and its Discontents." Scandal. Accusations of willfully misleading the public about the meaning of Freud's work (see Bettelheim, "Freud and Man's Soul"). Freud's work, it is pointed out, does not refer to a society characterizing certain individuals as "discontents," but rather to the fact that every culture necessarily generates a degree of "discontent" or "ill-being." Freud's thesis is that culture necessarily involves a "cost" in terms of "discontent" or "spiritual ill-being." This central idea is lost in the English translation of the title.

Again, I don't have a solution for this translation riddle. But clearly a machine would face serious difficulties in this task. First, it would have to determine whether *Unbehagen* refers to physical or spiritual discomfort, which would become clear from a reading of the book as a whole, not of the title in isolation. Second, the machine would look for the German noun *das Unbehagen*; "discontent" is a fair but not an exact approximation, and the machine would have to choose between other equally fair but inexact approximations. Finally, to avoid pitfalls such as distinguishing the "discontents" from "society" as a whole, the machine would need a clear understanding of Freud's work. I am afraid that this angst-sensitive Hal-like machine has not yet been produced by the laboratories of Urbana, Illinois.

The last illustration, from the legal field, is in my opinion an example not of failure but of glorious translation success: the bilingual text of the Civil Code of Quebec. The basic problem in legal translation lies in the differences between French legal concepts and English legal concepts. A translation of legal texts from French into German may be easier because of the common legal traditions shared by both languages. Taking some examples from this Code, we find that *De la réception de l'indu* is translated as "Reception of a Thing Not Due"; *De l'obligation à modalité simple* as "Simple Modalities"; *Des offres réelles et de la consignation* as "Tender and Deposit." One cannot reach these results without a detailed knowledge of the rules to which these different titles of the Code refer. In all these cases the words were translated by creative reformulation. A mechanical translation would lose not only beauty but also precision. *Offres réelles* are not "real offers." "Deposit," in this context, is not *dépôt*.

The Curse of the Senior Partner

A common problem experienced by senior partners in law firms stems from asking associates to do a translation. The associate — hypothetically not very familiar with the language he or she is translating into — comes up with his or her best effort. The senior partner finds that putting this effort in proper form takes more time and ends up

A Criminal Trial in Latin America

February 21-22, 2003

Renaissance Hotel

Atlanta, Georgia

Intermark Language Services will present a new seminar for Spanish translators and interpreters on February 21-22, 2003, at the Renaissance Hotel in Atlanta. The seminar is a follow-up to Intermark's popular sessions called "A Civil Lawsuit in the United States and Latin America." The new seminar will be called "A Criminal Trial in Latin America" and will be taught by Intermark president, attorney Thomas West. The course is designed for Spanish translators and interpreters and will cover the terminology of criminal investigation and prosecution in Latin American countries. Participants will also translate from Spanish into English various documents related to criminal prosecutions in countries throughout Latin America. The course lasts nine hours and will be submitted for continuing education credits. Further details and registration forms are available on the Intermark website.

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**The NAJIT Eastern Regional Conference (ERC)
will be held in New York City in February 2003.
Please check our website for further details.**

worse than if a good translator had done the translation from the beginning.

Machine translations are sometimes defended as a way to come up with a "first draft." Experience, however, suggests that very often these "first drafts" will cause more harm than good to the translation as a whole as the final drafter tries to untangle the linguistic horrors produced by the available software.

The End is Not Nigh

Translators, fear not. The machine that will make us obsolete has not yet been born.

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