

The day of the cyborg translator

By Jonathan Downie

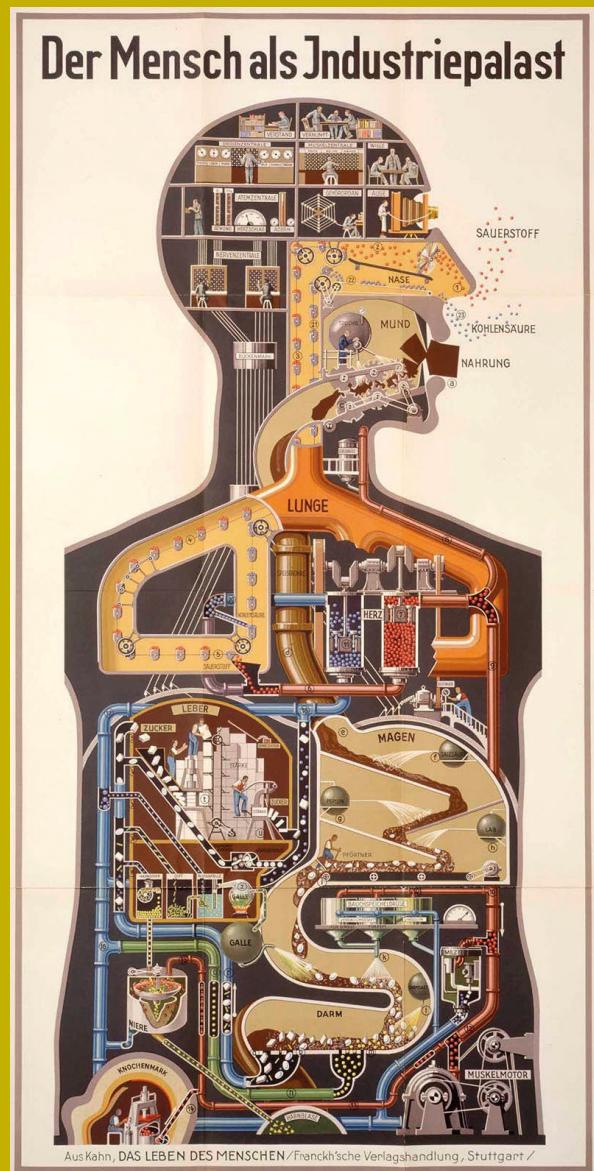
It sounds like something out of science fiction: computers and humans working together seamlessly to produce texts in a completely different language with perfect accuracy. Ask some experts and this is exactly what is happening now. Machine Translation, Translation Memories and Computer Aided Translation might not be phrases that are often discussed in the press but these are the technologies that are making it easier, quicker and more efficient to translate, powering much of the continued march of globalisation. So does this mean that computers will eventually take over translation entirely and put humans out of their jobs? To answer that, we will need to take a quick look at what each of these technologies actually does.

Machine Translation (MT) is the most well-known. Nowadays Google Translation has taken over from the geekily named "Babelfish" as the online tool of choice for those who want quick and dirty translation. While improvements in how

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the software works and several million words of input have meant that Google Translate can often give surprisingly good results, it is still more famous for showing the limits of Machine Translation rather than its potential. It would take a brave, or foolish, business person to use Google Translated output on their website without having it checked.

Translation Memory (TM) on the other hand, is much more useful. TM looks through texts to be translated and matches sections of it up with what has already been translated. For texts with a high degree of repetition such as contracts, manuals and the like, TM is a real boon. Used well, Translation Memories can



improve speed and consistency, especially for large projects involving millions of words and hundreds of translators. Organisations that produce thousands of documents per year, like the European Union, will use Translation Memory to ensure that their work is translated consistently. Software companies use Translation Memory to ensure phrases like “start menu” or “Left-click on the File menu” are translated the same way, every time they are used. In fact, there might be cases where a translator only has to translate a sentence once and the TM can automatically suggest this translation for every other appearance of the same sentence in the same project. TM is probably the most useful way that humans and machines can work together.

In Computer Aided Translation (CAT) TM gets added to other bags of tricks, such as terminology managers, dictionaries, Quality Assurance tools, encyclopaedias and even MT to offer translators the ultimate tool. Like a kind of digital Swiss Army Knife, CAT tools allow translators to bring together all kinds of information sources and ideas to crack the toughest translation problems. If you are working on a 20 page contract for equipment supplies that makes reference to French legal institutions, technical testing regulations for nuts and bolts and European safety regulations, you need all the help you can get! Nowadays, some new tools are even integrating project management software, allowing translators and agencies alike to better plan their time and manage several projects at once.

Given how powerful CAT tools can be, it is little wonder that they seem to have assimilated just about every

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probably spent £300 to buy the CAT tool in the first place.

Of course, it is perfectly fair to argue that the translator can now use the time the CAT tool has saved them to get more work and thereby earn more money. Still, it is undeniable CAT tools have made some kinds of translations cheaper and it is often the translators who are expected to bear the brunt of



translator you could meet. So, while computers might never replace translators, CAT tools might just have replaced dogs as a translator's best friend.

This does not mean, however, that the rise of CAT tools and MT are entirely benign phenomena. While they make translators' lives easier in some ways, they might also be causing changes that will make life more difficult for translators in the future.

The first change is a matter of plain old economics. Once clients hear that translators can do more work, more effectively, in less time, they start asking for discounts. Nowadays, it's rare to find an agency that doesn't ask you to give them a discount for “perfect matches”, “100% repetitions” or because they are providing a translation memory file. So, a job that might have been worth £1,000 if CAT tools didn't exist becomes one worth £750 or £700. This is despite the fact that the translator has

the change. Discounts for “100% matches” also assume that these require little to no work, which is rarely the case. It would be a poor translator who just blithely reused the same sentence as before without checking whether it made sense in the new context. In many cases, sentences have to be reshaped or adjusted, even if they look identical in the original text.

The theme of context leads us into the next issue with CAT tools, one which necessitates a little history lesson. In the days before CAT tools and even word processors, humans read texts in a mostly linear fashion. To read a book, you would pick it up, start at the beginning and read all the way to the end. Even books that had indexes required you to go to the index and then flick page-by-page to the point the index indicated. When you got there, you would then go back to your old linear search pattern to find the info you wanted. In short, any text had to work as a text. Each section had to relate

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coherently to those either side of it. Context mattered as it was context that helped you to understand the text.

Fast-forward to the world of internet browsers, smartphones, CAT tools and e-readers and the picture changes. When was the last software manual you read cover to cover (if they even have covers anymore!). How often have you bought an e-book and jumped to the particular section you were most interested in? Nowadays, texts are spliced to such an extent that you jump from one quasi-independent chunk to the next.

As researcher, Anthony Pym, points out here (http://usuaris.tinet.cat/apym/on-line/translation/2010_technology.pdf), CAT tools have done the same to translation as the information revolution has done to texts in general. Instead of the translators reading the entire text as a whole text, they are tempted, even forced, to read it as a sequence of chunks, each



one of which is matched not to other texts but to other chunks that have been similarly taken out of their original context.

For some texts, like software Help sections or manuals, this is not a problem since people are going to use the text in this way anyway. For texts that actually end up being read in the old, linear fashion, this can lead to the production of a text that is jumpier than a new Star Trek character in a red shirt, transported onto a hostile planet. If you ever wondered why a translation didn't seem to flow, bad use of CAT tools might just be the answer.

Pym's ideas therefore begin to point to what this human/computer relationship should look like. Rather than translators being assimilated to slavishly follow their CAT tools, it seems that they need to be taking the lead. Simple checks, which good professionals probably do reflexively, such as checking the context of a sentence and

reading the final translation through as a text in its own right, need to be carried out to counterbalance the deleterious effects of chopping the text up into small pieces.

All this shows once again how strange and unpredictable language can be. It could be argued that there should be no reason why the same sentence would need to be translated different ways in different contexts. Yet the fact that translators can't become cyborgs without their work suffering tells us that we might need to give translation and language itself some more respect. ¶

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