

TRANSLATION *News*

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MACHINE TRANSLATION IS CLAIMED TO HAVE GAINED NEW RESPECT AND ACCEPTANCE

In a feature article in the science section of The New York Times earlier this month, machine translation (MT) is claimed to have garnered new respect and acceptance, thanks in part to advances made in the field of artificial intelligence. The issue of machine translation has struck, according to many, at the heart of the translator's claim to creativity in the translation process, and thus has often resulted in a somewhat emotional debate within the translation industry.

According to the Times article, while the basis of machine translation, namely the use of powerful computers embodying massive dictionaries, rules of syntax and mathematical methods, or algorithms, to solve problems remains relatively intact, new techniques have been developed that are claimed to infer meaning by the context in which a word is used. These techniques, ostensibly derived from advances in artificial intelligence and the understanding of human intelligence, make it theoretically possible to organize semantic information in a hierarchical manner, permitting the computer to select the most likely meaning from a list of abstract possibilities.

Elaborating on that point, Dr. Jaime G. Carbonell, Director of the Center for Machine Translation at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, was quoted as saying, "By using semantic information, you can infuse a system with a degree of common sense it didn't have before when you used only syntax and word order."

"Unified Grammar" Method

Another method, which according to experts interviewed by the Times is receiving considerable attention, is one that provides for the use of so-called "unified grammars" or "Interlinguas". These elements contain common grammar concepts and universal meanings. Using this method, all languages are considered modules or spokes of a wheel that address a hub containing a common, central set of meanings - a kind of Esperanto or Interlingua for MT - before being translated into another language.

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REBUILDING OF KUWAIT COULD BRING RENEWED BUSINESS TO TRANSLATION INDUSTRY

Potential Lawsuits Against Iraq
Could Also Add To The Volume

Editor's Note: This space was originally reserved for an article about the role of interpreters and translators in the Persian Gulf War. However, with the cessation of hostilities and the favorable aftermath that may result for the translation industry, it was felt that publication of the story about translators and interpreters in combat should be postponed to a later date.

The announcement by the Government of Kuwait that it has allocated close to \$1 billion in contracts for rebuilding the war-torn nation, about 70% of which will go to American companies, was received as a hopeful sign for the near- to medium-future by many translators and translation company executives. While there are no guarantees that agreements signed by American companies, in particular, will result in major translation contracts, there is nonetheless sufficient precedent to indicate that translation will to some extent come into the picture.

[See "KUWAIT", Page 4]

MASSACHUSETTS REPEALS SALES TAX ON BUSINESS SERVICES

Five Per Cent Tax Would Have Been
Assessed On Translation and
Interpreting Services

Boston, MA.- Massachusetts has repealed a five per cent sales tax on all services, including translation and interpreting services. Governor William Weld had made it a campaign promise that if elected he would push for repeal of the measure.

Despite the severe fiscal crisis faced by the State in the face of mounting erosion of its
[See "SALES TAX", Page 7]

GROWTH OF CALIFORNIA'S SPANISH-SPEAKING POPULATION BODES FAVORABLY FOR STATE'S TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING INDUSTRIES

Los Angeles.- Recently-released census data for California indicate that the State's Hispanic population has increased some 70% since 1980. The four major cities of California, namely Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and San Jose, have all reported increases in the number of residents of Hispanic origin, ranging from San Francisco's 19.6% to San Diego's 76.6%.

While the number of Hispanic persons unable to read, write or speak English is not clearly known, the overall figures themselves indicate that State, county and local governments will have to continue, if not increase their efforts to provide essential documentation in English and Spanish.

In addition, it is expected that this growth in the Hispanic population will put more pressure on California courts, both State and Federal, to furnish interpreting services for those unable to understand English, or whose understanding of English is weak. Other States which have reported significant increases in the number of Spanish-speaking persons are Florida (which now has some 1.5 million persons of Hispanic origin), Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Illinois, New Jersey and New York.

BILINGUAL ADVERTISING SHOWS UP IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Naples, FL.- Bilingual advertising, which has been part of the Florida scenery for quite some time, especially in its southeast corner, has recently started to appear in the southwest area of the State. However, advertisements appearing in newspapers and other print media in the Fort Myers and Naples areas have not been in Spanish and English, but rather in German and English. In the last several years, the area has seen a large influx of German and Swiss tourists and real-estate investors, particularly in the Gulf coast resorts of Sanibel/Captiva and Marco Island.

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MONTEREY INSTITUTE UNDERTAKES SURVEY OF TRANSLATOR INTERNSHIPS

Monterey, CA.- The Monterey Institute of International Studies is conducting a survey of translator internship opportunities in the U.S. The Institute sent out a two-page survey questionnaire in February to corporations, translation service companies and other entities providing or requiring translation services to determine what opportunities exist for Monterey graduates to get practical training and develop their translation skills. For further information, write or call: Michelle Martinez, Career Development Assistant, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 425 Van Buren St., Monterey, CA 93940. Telephone (408) 647-4130. Fax (408) 647-4199.

PEN AMERICAN CENTER CONDEMNS RENEWAL OF RUSHDIE DEATH SENTENCE

New York, NY.- In a statement issued to the press on December 28, 1990, PEN (Poets, Essayists & Novelists) made the following statement about recent developments in the Salman Rushdie affair:

"Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, has again renewed the death threat against Salman Rushdie; again -- yet again -- the PEN American Center condemns this action.

"The assault on freedom of expression -- indeed, on human liberty -- that this edict constitutes is as profound and as repugnant today as it ever was. While Salman Rushdie's decision to 'enter into the body of Islam after a lifetime spent outside it', is strictly his concern, the illegality of the fatwa is unaltered, and our condemnation of it is as unequivocal.

"In our view any government making use of such an abhorrent edict against a free citizen of another country should face forceful and unremitting protest from the international community. We therefore urge the United States government to express once again, and in the strongest terms, its condemnation of this death sentence."

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY TO HOLD CONFERENCE ON LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR WORLD BUSINESS AND THE PROFESSIONS

Ypsilanti, MI.- Eastern Michigan University will hold its Tenth Annual Conference on Language and Communications for World Business and the Professions on April 3-6, 1991, at the Raddison-on-the-Lake Hotel in Ypsilanti. The Conference will consist of some 125 sessions dealing with a broad range of subjects concerned with communications and language in international commerce, trade, science and technology.

In addition, there will be eight post-conference workshops devoted to such topics as "Improving Cross-Cultural Business

[See "EMU CONFERENCE", Page 6]

**BABEL REVISITED:
THE GLOBAL VILLAGE AND THE
NEW ONE WORLD**

By Dr. Jonathan R. Slater

Before the Almighty destroyed the Tower of Babel, scattered the people to the four corners of the Earth and confounded their tongues, the world was essentially one. If we take Genesis at its word, humanity spoke one language. We worked together. This ease of communication and cooperation, along with our hubris, rendered the challenge of constructing a heaven-probing tower academic. The ensuing reaction by the Divine Mind was based on the belief that men and women separated by the gulf of language difference would no longer be able to collaborate on the building of skyward-spiralling zigarats and all that they entailed.

Since Babel, the world has remained fragmented. Yet there has emerged from time to time a certain nostalgia for those earlier biblical times. I look back to my childhood, when in America teachers, parents, the nation's more progressive political leaders and the press were uttering something about "one world." We were headed for the day when all creeds and races would become united; borders of every type would come down and in their place a utopian world governed by pluralistic democracy would arise. Everyone would slough off the oppressive skins of nationhood and learn Esperanto.

* * * * *

Today, blue suits have replaced blue jeans, and the idea of one world has moved from the be-ins to the boardroom. And this is not at all surprising, since within the last several years, we have witnessed the substantial growth of multinational corporations, an increase in the number of global products and the subsequent rise in international communications.

The new one-worlders -- the proponents of globalization -- say modern communications and travel have so shrunk the globe, consumer wants have been homogenized and cultural differences rendered insignificant. Without question, the electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of the way we converse both within our own culture and across to others. The world now comprises cultures whose information and ideas are given form by the vehicles of mass communication: television and the computer being the most glaring examples.

Yet globalization has overstated things, in particular the similarities between diverse groups of people throughout the world. Indeed, a growing number of so-called global products are being promoted today via advertising campaigns that have far more local input than in previous years. Messages for Coca-Cola, Parker Pens and Marlboro cigarettes are just a few of the communications that come to mind. The British still are not keen on Weight Watchers frozen entrees and the Brazilians react to corn flakes like kids to castor oil.

* * * * *

Although multinationals have long produced global brands -- products packaged and positioned in roughly the same manner worldwide -- they have made special efforts in the last several years to promote them. Some advertisers have sincerely been trying to adapt to the relevant differences between market environments. Others, like Canadian Club whisky, have used the same brand and virtually the same message in markets around the world. In the past, Eastman Kodak has relied on a world brand strategy for its line of blank tapes, while still keeping much of its other international marketing decentralized.

Advertising is perhaps the one component of marketing least easy to standardize. Legal strictures may require changes in copy or render certain media inaccessible to the advertiser. What is permitted in some places may be less tolerated or even taboo in others. Certain nations limit what one can say about health-related or medical products, for example. The Canadian government closely monitors all advertising for feminine hygiene products. In ads in the Netherlands, one cannot show children eating candy without showing a toothbrush, too. There is no cigarette advertising on television in the U.S., nor are women's undergarments allowed to be advertised in many Islamic countries.

Countries around the world differ in advertising styles, too. French and Italians demonstrate a preference for highly creative, stylish advertisements. Danes insist on very serious, factual ones. The Germans and Spaniards include a lot of product information, while the British and Americans show a fondness for humor and entertainment.

In general, global brands are few and far between: McDonald's, Pepsi and Levi's are some of the products which we all recognize for their global reach. For most other international brands it has made a lot more sense to plan local strategies. Take cars for example. In Britain, a great many cars are company cars, so advertising campaigns for autos have to be conceived in a completely different way from the way they are in the United States, where most vehicles are family-owned. In France, elegance and roadability are important selling points. In Germany, engineering and efficiency sell cars. And in Italy, acceleration and handling are the main draw.

Experts say advertisements that focus on specific styles of life travel least well from country to country, while those that travel best demonstrate a product's effectiveness, like the strength of a glue, or that rely on universal values like love of family, friendship and social harmony. But there is little evidence to suggest that even these values are universal and that people everywhere approach family, friendship and social harmony in equal ways.

This is not to say, however, that there are no similarities among certain peoples that marketers can exploit, as in Europe for example. But even in Europe, cultural differences among countries and regions must still be taken into consideration. A message

[See "BABEL", Page 5]

"MT" [continued from Page 1]

The developers and proponents of this "interlingua" or "unified grammar" method claim that translation is now simplified because there is now a central, intermediate "language" in which all terms and concepts have only one meaning for any sense in which they are used in the source language. The end result in the use of this approach is allegedly an avoidance of a major problem in MT: ambiguity.

One developer of this "interlingua" approach, the Tradux Corporation of Pompano Beach, FL, claims that its method will allow for greater simplicity than conventional methods, while still "producing highly accurate translations with only minimal editing."

Continued Scorn By Translators

The question of editing has remained a core feature of machine translation since 1964, when the IBM Corporation released its Russian-English "translation machine" in a hoopla of publicity. Although many companies in the field have claimed that their units can produce a near-perfect translation of a foreign language document, those claims have been scorned by many human translators. Even serious advocates of MT have admitted that all machine translation must, at least for the present, be subjected to human post-editing before being categorized as acceptable for clear communication purposes. Nevertheless, critics of MT maintain that another technique, called pre-editing, is what makes the machine translation product deceiving to the unaware. Those who doubt the ability of MT assert that pre-editing is analogous to pre-cooking. "A pre-cooked chicken dinner," said one MT critic, "may look like chicken and even taste like chicken, but it is devoid of all of the so-called 'nuances of taste' that are present in chicken cooked from scratch."

Companies commercially involved in MT tend to ignore those arguments, saying that they are nothing more than "artistic groans", and rather claim marked success with their products. Systran Translation Systems, Inc., of La Jolla, CA, now claims 85 per cent or better accuracy in machine translation of specialized documents into several languages. Claims of up to 98 per cent have also been voiced.

Lower Costs for MT

In addition, some MT firms also say that the costs for producing computerized translations are far less than the costs involved for human translation. Alan W. Portela of Systran was reported to have told the Times that it costs about \$45 a page for a human translator to translate manually from one language into another, compared to about \$20 a page for machine translation that is later checked by a human. However, Mr. Portela did not clarify whether the \$20 per page cost included human post-editing or even pre-editing, a technique which Systran has previously admitted to employing as part of the MT process. Mr. Portela was also reported to have said that translations of less-than-perfect accuracy have proved sufficient for some users who just want a quick sense of what some foreign language documents say.

In a mild contradiction of Mr. Portela's statements, Thomas F. Seal, President of Alpnat Inc. of Salt Lake City, UT, told The New York Times that it would probably be 25 years before anyone developed machine translation that could approach what human translators can do. He said that he doubted whether any machine would ever be able to handle translations of diplomatic correspondence, classic literature or legal documents, a doubt also expressed by some of the translation community's own champions of MT, such as Muriel Vasconcellos of the State University of New York at Binghamton and Veronica Lawson, an MT authority in the U.K.

The Brain Function Factor

One of the major obstacles in the past two and a half decades to bringing machine translation up to universally-acceptable standards, and even broad commercial viability, has been the mystery of how the human brain functions with respect to language. In fact, some of the early researchers in this field of MT theoretics (called computational linguistics), abandoned their work, saying that as long as the mysteries of the human brain and its functioning remained unraveled, machine translation would remain nothing more than an amateurish indulgence.

[See "MT", Page 7]

"KUWAIT" [continued from Page 1]

An official of the U.S. Department of Commerce expressed the belief that even though English is widely understood and used in Kuwait, the heavy destruction of the country's infrastructure necessitating a rebuilding from the bottom up, should result in a substantial translation effort. The official pointed out that essential documentation relative to the Gulf nation's basic services were either lost or destroyed in the final days of the war. "Operating and repair manuals, instructions and directives and other allied documentation for running Kuwait's refineries, power plants, water resources and other basic services were virtually destroyed by the retreating Iraqi army," he said.

To add to the favorable translation picture, TRANSLATION NEWS was told by several persons familiar with the Kuwait situation, that a goodly portion of the new equipment to be supplied for rebuilding the country's infrastructure will embody new technologies. One businessman said, "The rulers of Kuwait are going to want the most modern and state-of-the-art equipment, and we all know that they have the financial wherewithal to pay the price."

In a related development, it was reported in several national newspapers and magazines that American companies are preparing damage claims against the Iraqi government. Some of those claims, it is said, will run into millions of dollars. If the situation that followed the release of American hostages by Iran in the early 80's is any precedent, then the

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"BABEL" [continued from Page 3]

can only be considered truly standard when audiences in Bombay react to it the same as their counterparts in Boston.

Sometimes, it is relatively easy to decide on a single product design and advertising execution and then make all markets conform. But there are cases when conformity would be counter-productive. Young, upwardly mobile professionals in France and Italy consider it classy to drink whisky, but those in Britain do not. English and French mothers have no qualms about feeding their babies prepared food, but most Spanish mothers do not think it nutritious.

The electronic media have permitted speed-of-light communications to span the globe, touching almost everybody, everywhere. Transportation and communications technologies have, without question, made the world a smaller place. Yet, they have by no means made it into Marshal McLuhan's vision of a "global village." McLuhan, like many North American English-speakers could not see that the language gap would, after all, be of great consequence to the communications revolution.

An unknown number of advertisers have seen their global hopes dashed by the dual specters of language and translation. Many famous brands -- Parker's *contraceptive fountain pen* in Mexico and Pepsi's *resurrection soft drink* in Taiwan, notably -- and their advertising agencies have learned the hard way that the most effective translations for advertising purposes are often not the most literal ones. In the past, perfectly literal translations have urged users of products to *apply* their food, *ignite* their clothing or *weld* false eyelashes to their eyes. Millions of dollars have been wasted on promoting cigarettes with low asphalt.

But businesses have been seduced into thinking that reducing the amount of language in their messages will diminish the chances for misunderstanding across borders. In finding ways to get through to the global consumer, advertisers more than ever rely on the fact that visual signs communicate much faster, more directly than words. Images must succeed not only in drawing attention, but in communicating an idea or theme that can be linked to the advertised product. In a world that is suffused with claims, testimonials and guarantees, it may only be an unforgettable image that makes the real difference in persuasion.

Yet, creators of visual images often face difficulties in their attempts to establish a correspondence of ideas across cultures. One U.S. men's cologne manufacturer found that sales in some North African countries were significantly hurt by a print ad depicting a man alongside his trusty beagle, a definite *faux pas* in a region of the world where dogs are equated with uncleanness and sorcery. In another incident involving a well-known American mouthwash, a television commercial in Thailand portrayed a teenage boy and girl in hand, one telling the other to use the product

to fight bad breath. The image succeeded in angering viewers, who were embarrassed by such an open demonstration of boy-girl relationships. Pictures should not be exempt from the need for translation.

While the advertising industry has suffered greatly from one world nostalgia, the television industry has perhaps been the greater victim. Satellite broadcasting was at first heralded not just as a technological breakthrough to overcome the curvature of the Earth, but as sort of friendly "Big Brother" in the sky, pumping "Kojak" and "Wheel of Fortune" into every home.

Indeed, American programs are in demand -- almost 200,000 hours of television programming is exported from the United States each year to countries abroad. However, the belief that only the American soap opera and shoot-em-up will survive the battle of the small screen overseas has since been disproved. In Italy, for example, where over one hundred commercial channels compete for audience, RAI still wins the greatest number of viewers. The invasion from outer space is not a foregone conclusion anymore.

Even communications mogul Rupert Murdoch learned there is no such thing as a global village since becoming involved in satellite television. His dream for global media, an almost all-English-language enterprise called Sky Television, lost an estimated £ 150 million in its 1989 operations. What Sky Television uncovered about satellite TV services is that people prefer to watch and listen in their own languages -- and Murdoch was up against 320 million Western Europeans with nine languages and distinctive social habits.

Today, satellite television is becoming recognized as simply an efficient way to overcome physical obstacles and perhaps bureaucratic obstacles. Nevertheless, some producers and advertisers are certain that messages that transcend national frontiers will do better if they transcend national languages. These groups are now putting a premium on the big visual idea in cross-border broadcasts, with less emphasis on verbal communication.

The irony is this: as messages become increasingly global, the trend is to remove language and subsequently increase the reliance on visual content. As the reach of these communications becomes less localized, the messages become more visual, as a way of supposedly communicating without concern for any language barrier. But as they become more visual, these messages seem to be about concepts that are inescapably cultural -- and the problem of translation has not, in any sense, gone away.

The idea of a global village is disquietingly pragmatic, and ultimately fails to consider language and culture. Advertising and television should not abandon their multinational, multimarket aspirations, but need to squarely face the fact that we live after Babel, in a world of many tongues, many peoples.

Communication Between Japanese and Americans", "German for International Business and Technology", "Spanish for International Business", and others of a similar nature. For further information, write or call: The World College, 307 Goodison Hall, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48197. Telephone (313) 487-2414.

"GOOD SAMARITAN TRANSLATOR" MAKES INSTANT CORRECTION...AND GETS A REFUND

Everglades City, FL.- The sign at a table in a county park read "For Snack Bar Patrons Only". Under it, it read "Solamente para los patrones de la cantina." A young Hispanic couple brought their coffee and doughnuts to the table, but looked puzzlingly at the sign. The young man returned to the snack bar and asked the owner, "Is that table for US or for YOU?" The owner, confused by the young man's question, responded, "It's for you, of course, but why do you ask?" The young man then explained that the English sign said that the table was reserved for the customers, but the Spanish sign said it was reserved for the owners. The snack bar owner whipped out a piece of paper, handed it to the young man and asked him to write it correctly in Spanish. The owner took the paper and taped it over the erroneous Spanish sign. "Here," he said, reaching into his pocket, pulling out the money that the couple had paid for their food and drink, "this is for calling my attention to it."

TRANSLATION CONFERENCE ANNOUNCED

New York, NY.- A one-day conference on both literary and scientific-technical aspects of translation has been announced by the Graduate School of the City University of New York (CUNY). The conference will be held on Friday, April 19th at the CUNY Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd Street in New York City. The pre-registration fee, which includes a hot lunch, is \$12.50; registration at the desk is \$17.50.

The conference will feature two sessions on stylistic considerations in scientific and technical translation. The first will be chaired by Klaus Gogmlch of the Institute of Applied Linguistics of Kent State University, and the second will be led by Sue Ellen Wright of the same institution.

Further information can be obtained by writing to Dr. Renee Waldinger, CUNY Graduate School, 33 West 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.

**"If you haven't been reading
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It's Official...Well, Nearly.

PUERTO RICO SENATE APPROVES BILL TO MAKE SPANISH ISLAND'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

San Juan, PR.- The upper house of the Puerto Rico legislature has approved a bill that would make Spanish the official language of the Commonwealth, a move that is viewed as a blow to the statehood movement.

Last year the lower house approved the same bill, but the Senate insisted that it embody an amendment stipulating that English continue to be taught as a second language in Puerto Rico's schools. Passage of the amended bill by the Puerto Rico House of Representatives is fairly assured.

The new law would revoke the Official Languages Act of 1902, which designated both English and Spanish as the language of the government's business.

However, giving Spanish official status will have little practical impact, since the business of the island's government is already conducted in Spanish, with business of the Federal government, including that carried on in the Federal courts of the Commonwealth, continuing to be conducted in English. Thus, many observers feel that the impact of the so-called "Spanish only" bill will be political. The Senate whip, Gilberto Rivera Ortiz, said that the object of the legislation was to "clarify the concept of Spanish as our official language." He added that, "We are not rejecting the English language, for we accept that we have to promote English to our students because it is essential to promote our economic development."

Less than 25 per cent of Puerto Ricans are fully bilingual in Spanish and English. Opponents of the legislation claim that it would set back efforts to extend English literacy.

However, what remains to be seen is whether there will be a backlash to this bill in the United States Congress, which has been debating the future status of Puerto Rico. And some believe that Puerto Rico's action could fuel the efforts of such private lobbying groups as "U.S. English", which has been pressuring Congress to make English the official language of the United States.

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"SALES TAX" [continued from Page 1]

tax base, legislators were reluctant to keep the sales taxes on services on the books. Adding to the lawmakers reluctance was no doubt the massive lobbying campaign undertaken by diverse groups of businesspeople and professionals. The Bay State's tax on services, which also included legal, accounting and engineering services, was one of the broadest such assessments in the U.S., and was effective for just one day prior to its repeal.

The action by the Massachusetts legislature might also be taken as a signal by other States which have considered imposing a sales tax on a host of business and professional services because of a shrinking industrial tax base. Clearly, of the other some 30 States facing severe budget problems, the repeal of the Massachusetts services tax might cause many, if not most of them to seek other sources of revenue. New York defeated a limited services tax last year, and several years ago, Florida aborted its sales tax on advertising following threats of boycott and a massive lobbying effort.

Nonetheless, the idea of assessing sales taxes on business and professional services is far from dead. For one, advocates for many minority groups indicate that they will intensify their efforts to have such tax legislation imposed, saying that fiscal bankruptcy could result for many States unless the service industries, one of the major cornerstones of today's economy, are made to carry their fair share of the tax burden.

"KUWAIT" [continued from Page 4]

translation industry might reap additional economic benefits.

After the release of the American hostages by Iran, numerous American companies filed damage suits in international courts for confiscation and destruction of their property and assets. Although the three Iranian justices who sat on the main panel of the international court in The Hague were fluent in both written and spoken English, they demanded that all papers and documents be submitted in English and Farsi. This demand led to hundreds of translation contracts; one Farsi translator working under sub-contract to a translation service company earned just under \$20,000 in four months. Translation companies in all parts of the country were involved in the translation of claims documentation, with some reporting earnings ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000.

It is difficult to predict whether translation will be part of any international legal proceedings brought against Iraq. Much will depend on whether Iraq has the ability to pay claims damages (although some \$4 to \$6 billion of its assets have been frozen in the U.S.), and whether any Iraqis appointed to the various international court panels will have the muscle that their Iranian counterparts had to demand that all documentation be submitted in both English and Arabic. And finally, there is the question of Iraq's political future, as Shiite Muslim insurgents in the south and Kurdish insurgents in the north threaten the country with civil war.

In addition to lawsuits being prepared by American corporations, it was reported in the national press that Kuwaiti, French and British firms may also seek damages in the international courts.

"MT" [continued from Page 4]

To some extent, those researchers have been proven wrong, since machine translation has been able to make inroads in certain areas of translation. Intelligence-gathering is one such area. Whereas in years past, cover-cover translation by human translators was the norm for massive amounts of documents that required scanning for intelligence purposes, today much of that work is done with translation computers. However, for higher levels of communication, the arguments of the early MT researchers still appear valid.

New Brain-Function Research

In fact, in the area of the brain's language functions, new research has advanced a theory, apparently widely received, that the processing of written and spoken language in the human brain is really two separate and distinct functions, taking place in various sub-compartments of the brain, with specific functions assigned to independent sub-systems.

In the March issue of "Nature" magazine, Dr. Alfonso Caramazza, professor and director of cognitive science at Johns Hopkins University, elaborates on this new theory. Dr. Steven Pinker, a professor of cognitive science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology commented on Dr. Caramazza's study by saying that, "it touches on one of the hottest issues in cognitive neuro-science, for it raises the hitherto-unasked question of whether the brain is a huge network of interconnections that gains complexity by following simple rules of learning, or whether it is a network of dedicated compartments that carry out tasks independently?"

These new findings could in theory have a major impact on computerized translation, in particular. If the theory of the early dissident computational linguists is still valid, i.e., that machine translation cannot succeed until the functioning of the human brain is fully understood, and given that current theories of artificial intelligence and cognitive science (which have formed the basis of MT research) have been based upon erroneous suppositions of human brain function in respect of language, then machine translation, as it is currently designed and employed, might remain stuck in its present condition, or in a worst-case scenario, suffer a major setback. Conversely, if the findings of Dr. Caramazza and his associates prove even somewhat valid, then with this newly-found understanding of language-brain function, machine translation could see a quantum leap.

(Following are letters on this subject addressed to the editor of The New York Times. See Page 8)

(The following two letters were addressed to The New York Times in response to an article on machine translation which appeared in that newspaper on March 5, 1991.)

To the Editor,
The New York Times

It is of course true that some advances have been made in computer translation over the last decade. But any suggestion that interlingual methods linked to artificial intelligence represent a major breakthrough is certainly premature. You mention the Tradux system as possibly proving such a point, but at this firm's recent New York presentation a large group of stockholders, journalists, translators and United Nations personnel saw no real system demonstrated at all. What those attending saw was an unused Sun workstation sitting on a table, although some had come with disks and technical questions to test its performance.

It should be recognized that figures such as "an 85% accuracy rate" for translations (claims of 95% or even 98% are also heard) are rather misleading. Even a 98% accuracy rate will ensure that there are five errors on every double-spaced typed page, 95% entails one error in every second line, and 90% adds up to one error in every line. Since computers excel at spelling and punctuation, these may well be deep errors of meaning.

There would seem to be some deep-seated human yearning that all problems connected with understanding language can suddenly vanish, and we can just let a machine decide what we really mean. It should be obvious that this will prove possible only in the most specialized of cases. Perhaps the phrase "computer translation" is itself based upon a linguistic failure. If these techniques were instead called "Computer Assisted Language Conversion" (or CALC for short), they would be playing the honorable and uncontroversial role in document management they undoubtedly deserve.

Alex Gross, Chairman
Machine Translation Committee
New York Circle of Translators.

To the Editor,
The New York Times

Warren E. Leary's "Computers Gain New Respect as Translators" reads to this very human translator like puffery for the program producers and for academics looking to fund theories that have few applications in the real world of international trade and government.

Computerized translation will always be impractical for anything other than parts lists that comprise millions of items and in applications with a very limited universe of discourse and a highly formalized input syntax, weather forecasting for example. Otherwise, translation is essentially editing, and the process is a series of often arbitrary executive decisions that no one would willingly leave up to a computer. The sex and social status of the parties to a communication can be conveyed in Japanese for example just by the formality of the terminology and by word ending, and acceptable German business communications have noun phrases where we would prefer clauses. In computerized translation, these decisions have to be made both before and after the machinery stage, and they have to be made by humans not only skillful in both grammars but also sensitive to all the cultural taboos of the language at each end -- by translators, that is. The computers are redundant.

Even computer-assisted translation systems, which are mainly ordinary word-processing programs backed up by electronic terminology banks never have enough terms in them and take too long to access as compared with flipping the pages in a dictionary.

The best way to obtain information from foreign language sources and to communicate with potential foreign clients remains the human with his or her vast memory and extensive writing skills supported by shelves of printed-paper reference works and a word processor, telefax and modem.

Thomas J. Snow
Committee on Terminology
New York Circle of Translators

In Memoriam

HORTENSIA CONTIN, a veteran Spanish translator of over 200 textbooks on subjects ranging from technical to the humanities, died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage on February 23rd at her home in Santa Maria, CA. Together with her husband, Agustin, she formed a translation team that garnered the respect and admiration of both clients and colleagues.

Mrs. Contin was born in Saltillo, Coah., Mexico, on March 6, 1939. She received a degree in chemical engineering from the University of California at Berkeley, but upon her return to Mexico, she took up translating as a full-time career. Upon her return to the U.S. in 1982, she became an American citizen. In addition to her translations of textbooks, Mrs. Contin also translated more than 100 booklets for the RATC program of the American Embassy in Mexico City. She held membership in the American Translators Association.

* * * * *

For us at TRANSLATION NEWS she had very special meaning, for she shared our beliefs in the diversity of translation, and consequently

the diversity of translators. It was that belief that led her to become an early supporter of this publication. She kept up the flow of encouraging words and backed those words with financial generosity. However, to describe justly the true being of this remarkable woman, we feel that we must defer to her husband:

"Hortensia was truly a wonderful lady, full of laughter, friendship and love for all creatures of God. For me, she was the best wife a man has the right to dream of, and also the closest, most precious friend. Our children worshipped her.

"She was also, and above all, a Christian who lived, spoke and acted as such. She was an almost perfect example for us all, and we thank the Lord, because He, in His infinite mercy, allowed us to have the happiness of her presence for so many years. Her loss to me is like the very light of my eyes has been taken from me."

Mrs. Contin is survived by her husband and 3 children - Igor, Armand and Laura - and a grandson, Liam.

EDITORIAL

In last month's issue, our resident iconoclast, Tom Snow, made some passing references to certain calls for licensing of translators. Calls, demands, requests and urgings for translator licensing are not new in our industry. They've been around for at least some 30 years, and more recently, such august practitioners of translation as Benjamin Teague, winner of ATA's Gode Medal, and Professors Lucy Hilford-Greiner and Leonel Antonio de la Cuesta, have added their names to the list of proponents of translator licensing. Now, calls for licensing (sometimes referred to by the more polite term "certification") of those who earn their daily bread in that broad field known as the Communications Arts also go back many years. And we must not also overlook the fact that many countries have licensing procedures for all sorts and manners of scribes, irrespective of whether such scribes scribe original or adopted (or adapted) words.

About 10 years ago, the legislature of Puerto Rico, taking its inspiration from several of its Latin-American sisters, attempted to pass a bill that would have required JOURNALISTS to obtain a license before putting their words to paper. Unmindful (or perhaps ignorant) of a similar attempt by the State of Nevada in 1963 (the bill of the Fun & Games State called for the licensing of ALL WRITERS), it went ahead with its debates, and that caused The New York Times (an unlicensed and uncertified member of the Communications Arts) to write an editorial entitled, "The Dirty Secret of Journalism". What was so interesting about that editorial was that with the mere substitution of a few words, it had remarkable applicability to our trade, or industry, or profession. Here now, is a PARAPHRASED version of that New York Times editorial, which we shall call...

THE DIRTY SECRET OF TRANSLATION

There's an ill, unconstitutional wind blowing from a segment of the language and communications arts that has driven some of our colleagues astray. We almost said "professional" colleagues, but their desire for such exalted designation, and the higher fees or wages or salaries it might bring, is precisely the problem.

In envious emulation of physicians and lawyers, many of our industry's wordsmiths, dictionary hounds and assorted scribes aspire to the status of Translator. So they urge laws that would create a kind of College of Translators to which all would have to belong or risk unemployment or under-employment, or relegation to some lowly social status. This College, to be run by the American Translators Association, for example, would proclaim its adherents and registrants as a "professional group", speak to their standards of performance, accredit and certify all practitioners and "protect" their rights.

Some members of the translation community, known by such sotto voce expletives as "malcontents", "agitators", "hacks", "unprofessionals", et al, have sensibly opposed the idea, but nonetheless several have already introduced and implemented an accreditation program, and others have expressed the desire of going one step further: LICENSING of translators, based upon laws and procedures particular to some European and Latin-American nations. The latter, i.e., LICENSING, doesn't have a prayer of surviving a test in the United States Supreme Court, which - conservatism aside - will view the licensing of anyone who makes his or her living through the use, application and implementation of language as the original British sin that gave birth to the Constitution's First Amendment. But we can't resist the opportunity to add some extra-constitutional advice to all who are seduced by the hope of "professionalism" in our truly unruly craft.

Why should any person with a typewriter or word-processor be allowed to play upon the public's mind and emotions? And why should they be spared from having to meet the professional standards of the sort routinely prescribed for surgeons, barbers and auto mechanics?

The ultimate, uncomfortable answer is that translation - the process of converting words, phrases, ideas and cultural concepts from one language to another - does not lend itself to scientific or mechanical verification. Translation exists only in the eyes of the beholder, is subject to constant scrutiny (sometimes even public scrutiny), amendment and correction, and indeed gains validity only gradually, in contest with error and untruth.

Some people are certainly more adept than others in converting the words, phrases, ideas and cultural concepts from one language to another, although the question of who is adept and who is not is subject to the subjective opinion of the beholder. But "responsibility" or "license-worthy" standards given the force of law would instantly rob our trade of its most vital tools: the practitioner's inner vision and inner voice about what is true, correct, accurate, false, incorrect and inaccurate.

Thus to limit translators is to diminish their work, not enable it. It is also to jeopardize the distribution and dissemination of information that society should cherish most - the kind that at first hearing almost always strikes someone as useless, or incorrect or improper or even irresponsible.

There is simply no telling in advance which of us will stumble upon beautiful translation and handsome language-conversion. The DIRTY SECRET of our business is that we are not, after all, translators, only language artistes.

TRANSLATION NEWS

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