

# Teletranslation Comes of Age

**Language-Industry Seer Minako O'Hagan looks at trends in telecommunications, virtual reality, and the Internet.**

**A**uthor of *The Coming Industry of Teletranslation* (Multilingual Matters, 1996), Minako O'Hagan was one of the first to provide a comprehensive vision of how telecommunications would impact both the need for and provision of translation services. *Language International* asked her to update her impressions.

**Language International:** When published a year ago, your book gave only two mentions to the World Wide Web. How do you assess the impact of the fast-moving Web today?

**Minako O'Hagan:** My writing took place between 1993 and early 1995 and at the time the Web had only just appeared on the scene. It was difficult to know if it was a passing phase or something here to stay. By comparison, the telecommunications networks were solidly in place and their marriage to computers was something definite and continuing to be developed. In a sense it doesn't really matter to the theme of the book whether the embodiment of teletranslation happens to be on the Web or something else.

The main message is the inevitable connection between language services and the advancing marriage of telecommunications and computers. In fact I am delighted to see the concept of teletranslation being taken on and implemented on the Web. There is now even a company called "Tele Translation" there. To me that is very rewarding feedback because people are using the principle and interpreting it in line with the means which have become available. There is now very little doubt that the Web is going to further impact the shape and form of teletranslation.

**LI:** You refer to the integration of automatic translation systems into the teletranslation service mix. How do you position this technology in the Asia-Pacific region today?

**MO:** I see online automatic translation services developing to meet new Web-induced translation needs

which differ from the traditional demand for real-time, low-cost, and information-only translations. As CompuServe, Globalink, and Fujitsu have demonstrated, online automatic translation services are coming from outside the traditional translation suppliers, who will be reluctant to offer raw automatic translation output, since they know they are generally of low quality. Newcomers are likely to be more ruthless in offering automatic translation services with clear trade-offs among price, speed, and cost. According to a 1996 JEIDA (Japan Electronic Industry Development Association) network user survey published recently, more than 85 percent of the 212 Japanese respondents had indicated difficulties in understanding English on the Web and nearly 50 percent had tried automatic translation of some sort as a support tool to gather information on the Web.

JEIDA found that automatic translation use was higher than expected given the small number of low-cost Web automatic translation products available at the time of the survey. Judging also from sales figures of Web automatic-translation packages and the number of new releases in Japan, the needs are obviously significant. If you are a native English speaker or a multilingual European, you just cannot imagine how frustrating it is to see site after site in English only! Growth of the online environment has definitely pushed real-time translation needs to an unprecedented high level, particularly in Japan. So the challenge for translation suppliers is how to tap into these specific needs.

My impression is that among all the translation sectors it is the localization business that is most seriously embracing the application of automatic translation as a productivity tool. After all, Microsoft is quoted as stating that it will not give business to a vendor who doesn't have machine-translation capability. I have a feeling that localizers will also be the first to adopt the translator's workstation which combines an automatic translation component.



Minako O'Hagan

**LI:** How do you interpret the “clash of civilizations” view of the translation market: i.e., that the USA has one approach to translating, Europe another, and Asia Pacific another, and they are not exportable?

**MO:** I think the whole profession of translators and interpreters has long worked on the assumption expressed in Samuel Huntington’s hypothesis that the clash of civilizations (i.e., cultures) is the cause of today’s major conflicts in the world. As far as language-service suppliers are concerned, my observations after talking to industry people in Europe, the US, and Japan are that they more or less face the same problems: how to cope with clients’ “unreasonable” demands (both cost and time-frame), how to find skilled translators, which technology to use, etc. Despite the clash of cultures causing differences, in terms of translation problems, I’ve found more commonalities than conflicts among countries.

As for interesting cross-cultural developments associated with teletranslation, I see the emergence of teleservices or virtual services such as telemedicine and virtual universities as potentially significant. They are by definition global services and therefore destined to stumble into linguistic and cultural barriers. In order to meet the demands of these virtual services, emerging Web-based teletranslation services in varying scales need to become increasingly tech-savvy as well as quality-conscious.

Today the most sophisticated use of network capabilities and information technology is found in multinational translation firms. A company like AlpNet, for example, has invested in the development of global virtual-communication space in addition to its physical presence in key locations. I would call AlpNet an early adopter of the teletranslation concept by establishing virtual functionality in a major way in all facets of its business.

**LI:** In a paper at a recent LISA conference, you spoke of the “paradox of localization”—that it enables people to use a product in their culture, but it cannot then be used to communicate back to the original culture. Elucidation, please.

**MO:** I was particularly thinking in terms of today’s Internet/Web context, whereby documents produced often switch back and forth across linguistic barriers, each time requiring translation. While other products such as cars can be safely localized to an individual country’s requirements with no further consequences, software products are used to produce documents which

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may themselves need to go through the “localization” (translation) process once again. I wonder if there might be some way to incorporate specific elements or functionalities into localized products so as to make any subsequent translation process easier—for example, the translator might be able to use such functionalities to take advantage of the fact that the document was first created and later read using the same parent software after the translation process has been completed.

**LI:** You also talked about how virtual reality (VR) will open up different kind of tools for overcoming cultural barriers to translation. How might this technology affect the translation/localization/product marketing context?

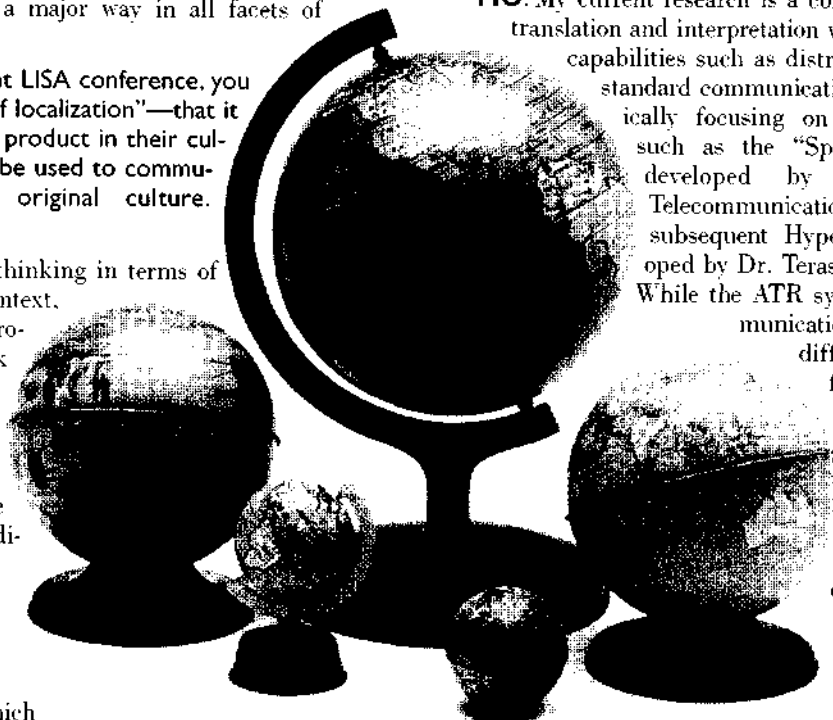
**MO:** Looking into the future I can’t help thinking that VR is going to have a huge impact on our communications behavior, and thus on the profession of translators and interpreters. The VRML (Virtual

Reality Markup Language) has begun to be used in some Web sites enabling a sort of 3-D interactive VR on the screen where people can “walk through” the information landscape using avatars (virtual representatives of themselves), for example, to search for information instead of reading through text. When all kinds of documentation start to incorporate VR, translators of computer manuals and patents may be much better able to understand the information otherwise expressed only in text. In the same way, VR as a collaborative space could be used to test localized products by linking the local market user and the software producer together for interactive evaluation sessions. And VR conferencing could shift interpreters’ workplaces from face-to-face to virtual encounters.

**LI:** Does this form part of your current research program?

**MO:** My current research is a conceptualization of the future of translation and interpretation when emerging communications capabilities such as distributed VR become part of the standard communications infrastructure. I am specifically focusing on networked VR environments such as the “Space Teleconferencing System” developed by Japan’s ATR (Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute) and a subsequent HyperReality (HR) concept developed by Dr. Terashima who led the ATR project. While the ATR system enables multimodal communications for participants who are in different locations HR attempts to further integrate VR into the real physical space. So, when you visit the Louvre (physically) some of the visitors may only be telepresenting there. The interface technology will become less obtrusive as it improves and this will make the “frame” of the virtual world less noticeable. His idea is that we will increasingly

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live in the dual communications space of real and virtual. Furthermore, in the HyperWorld there would be artificial life as well as real life. I am exploring how translators and interpreters would work in HR environments. The use of intelligent agents and avatars is also part of my interest.

**LI:** What kind of responses did your book receive from the “establishment”?

**MO:** I am delighted with the positive feedback I have received from various sources. In particular, the Center for Interpretation and Translation Studies (CITS) at the University of Hawaii has been most supportive and its director Professor Ashworth has endorsed my work to the extent that he has been using the book as a textbook in one of his courses. He is also involving me in his plan to develop a course on teletranslation taught via the Internet. Collaboration with him in cyberspace has been tremendous. His interest in putting the concept of teletranslation into practice has been one of my best rewards for having published the book. I am hoping that an opportunity will come up to revise the book perhaps by way of incorporating my current research on HyperReality.

**LI:** And what about the most interesting book you have read recently.

**MO:** Without doubt it would be Morris West's novel *The Ringmaster*. To me the story depicts the real contributions translators and interpreters make to interlingual communication. My favorite quote from the book: “More than half the cost of international business is used up in dialogues of the deaf, between people who are totally ignorant of each other's laws, customs, and business dialect.”

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