AltaVista Translates
in RealTime

The Web's top search engine brings machine translation to the masses.

REVIEW BY
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One of the best-known search engines on the Web is the DEC spin-off AltaVista. A year ago it was among the first such applications to go multilingual, localizing its search strings and interface into a number of European and other languages. Now AltaVista has gone truly interlingual: you click on a "Translate" link and get a translation of the text of the Web site page returned by a search query.

When AltaVista upgraded its service in 1996 to local-language searches, this signaled a certain maturing of the Web's multilingual vocation, and opened the way for a full-fledged search-in-a-language approach to the Web as a global working resource. There is still some way to go, of course; AltaVista had (and still has) to master more scripts and extend its overall language recognition base to give true universal coverage. But during 1997 the potential for accessing information from the world over had become a question of *when*, not *if*.
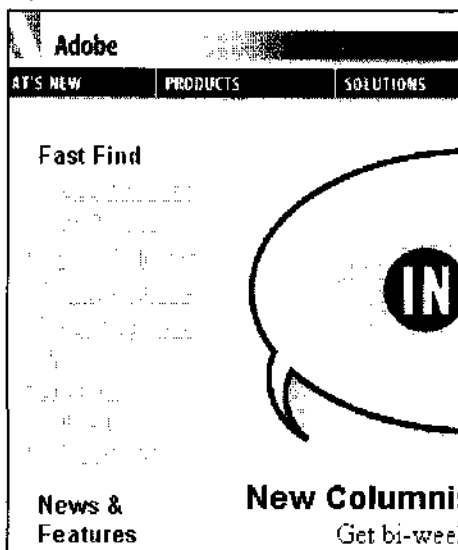
Plug-and-Chug

Late last year, the California-based AltaVista team reached an agreement with Systran to provide a one-stop translation service for Web pages (or any other one-page texts) via a simple link to the Systranet site appended to listed Web sites found via an AltaVista search. Although there are other online translation services available, this move by AltaVista is, as far as we know, the first outside Japan to make translation an integral part of the act of searching. And in doing so, it might herald a behavioral shift that goes to the core of language management on the Web.

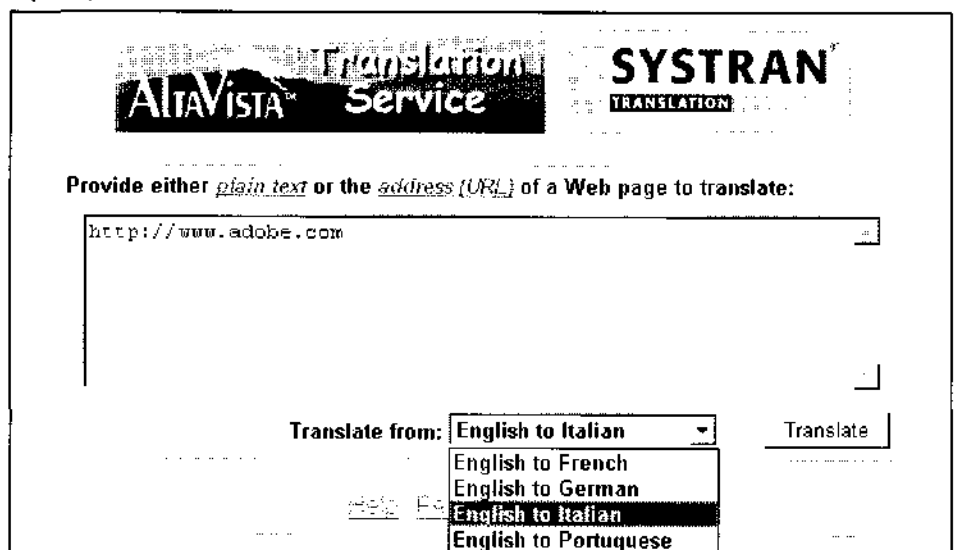Instead of isolating translation as a separate operation requiring special manipulation, a real-time link will demystify the very concept of translation, simplifying it into an option within some other information-based task. Even the reference in the AltaVista's URL to the much-abused "babelfish" (a fictional translating fish dreamt up by the author of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) seems too high-profile an image for this brave new dispensation: under AltaVista, translation becomes just another computing function. Henceforth, we must learn to accept that the "Translate" button in this context will be very much on a par with our PC's "Print" or "New search" commands. A "translation" will simply become a universal channel by which "information" reaches us.

This does not, of course, reduce translators themselves to computing functions. Indeed, can language professionals derive benefit from such a service? The answer of course is yes, but only as information

Provide either *plain text* or the *address (URL)* of a Web page to translate:

http://www.adobe.com

Translate from: English to Italian   Translate

English to French
English to German
English to Italian
English to Portuguese

seekers in need of a "gisting" service. It will not offer translators a free tool for their regular language work, but as the Web site itself admits, will give them a few insider laughs. Currently the service is limited to two-way translation between English and French, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. Truly global information seekers will only be satisfied when they can use a Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and Japanese translation option. But as a test-bed (the site is still in beta

testing), the "FPIGS" bundle is probably enough languages for AltaVista engineers to be getting on with.

One-Stop Translation

Using it is simple enough: If you click on the Translate link for a site returned from an AltaVista search, you switch to the "babelfish" page, validate the URL reference, and choose your language combinations. The system will return a translation in seconds. You can also paste in text from anywhere at all to translate, of course, but the system seems constrained to only handle one page-worth at a time.

As a gisting service, it works fairly effectively on well-written and well-punctuated texts such as news reports, and fails miserably on most colloquial material. The site makes no attempt to get users to select special dictionaries or identify any of the usual user categories required by MT systems to boost quality. Hence our emphasis on the "behavioral" impact of such a service. AltaVista seems to be saying: just do it, don't think about it.

Contact

http://babelfish.altavista.digital.com

"Information Gisting" at Work

Here is a page from AltaVista's own presentation back-translated from a Sytranned French translation of the English original:

Original:

AltaVista's Translation Assistant provides a free service to the Internet community. The world is a big place and, although the Web has helped to bring us all together, until now, we haven't been able to communicate across language barriers. AltaVista and Systran, a leader in the field of Machine Translations, hope to change that. Remember that a computer—not an actual human translator—translates the text. Computerized translations often miss subtle meanings of words and don't accurately present many common sayings.

Back-translation of French version:

Of translations of AltaVista the assistance provides a free service to the Internet community. The world is a great place and, although the Web helped to join together us all, up to now, we could not communicate through linguistic barriers. AltaVista and Systran, a starter in the field of machine translations, hope to change that. Point out you that a computer—not a real human translator—translated the text. The automated translations often miss subtle significance's of the words and do not present many common statings exactly.