

The Value of Internet Translation Portals

I remember back in December 1997 when Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) and Systran SA announced the first free on-line translation web service on AltaVista, known as Babel Fish. At the time, I was working at the Center for Machine Translation of Carnegie Mellon University and one of our project clients came back to us within a few days of the announcement wanting to know why it was necessary to pay for a custom-made system created by our project whereas a free on-line service could be accessed via the Internet. So, a few colleagues and I spent a couple of days testing and evaluating Babel Fish and gave a report on it, just to demonstrate the inferiority of the Babel Fish on-line system compared with the one we were developing. Now, my intention in this column article is not to provide the results of that report. Many other evaluations of Babel Fish (i.e., Ament, 1998; Bennett, 2000) have been conducted and can be consulted with regard to its performance. My objective in this article is rather to give a perspective on the value of such free Internet on-line translation portals and services, and what they have done for the MT market over the past couple of years.

Everyone has caught on to the free access Internet translation portal bandwagon. Take a look below at a certainly non-exhaustive list of translation portals that I have compiled:

<http://www.voila.fr/Trans/>
<http://www.voila.com/Services/Translate/>
<http://www.reverso.net/>
<http://www.softissimo.com/>
<http://www.t-mail.com/>
<http://babelfish.altavista.digital.com/cgi-bin/translate?>
<http://www.systransoft.com/>
<http://lexica.epiuse.co.za/CyberTrans.html>
<http://www.freetranslation.com/>
<http://www.tranexp.com/>
<http://lycoses.reverso.net/>
<http://translate.lycos.com/>
<http://www.translate.ru/eng/>
<http://www.gy.com/language.htm>
<http://t1.sail-labs.com/t1probe.html>
<http://www.trident.com.ua/online/index.html>
<http://www.babylon.com/>
<http://www.tranexp.com:2000/InterTran>
<http://www.elingo.com/>
<http://www.worldblaze.com/>
http://www.alis.com/translate_online.html
<http://www.lhsl.com/itranslator/demo/>
<http://www.utvs.gotoworld/UTDictionary/default.asp>
<http://comprende.globalink.com/> (not available)

<http://www.translate-online.com> (no longer available)

Yes, I am fully aware that there is redundant overlapping of translation systems in the list above. This is due to the fact that many MT developers offer their translation systems on various Web sites and through partnerships with different search engine services. I refer IJLD readers to a recent article (Lockwood, 2000) on the difference between MT engine developers, portal aggregators, and language technology integrators. Also, my list above does not make a distinction between word-for-word translation dictionaries and full MT parsing engines. This list of sites is only intended to show that the number of participants in the Internet translation portal business is growing quite rapidly.

With so many on-line systems popping up all over the Internet on Web site driven translation portals, what is really the value of these portals and of the MT systems that they represent?

The reason behind setting up a "free access" translation portal reflects the marketing strategies of nearly a dozen companies specialised in MT system development and implementation. They have tried it out in different ways, but the general approach seems to be similar between them. Free access allows the Internet user community to use and test the system at their leisure. It also encourages the general population to try out the systems and to tell their friends and colleagues about it. If someone offers you a free lunch, would you refuse to take them up on it? By employing such a strategy, these companies are able to actually "create a market" for computerized translation programs by attracting a significantly large market of Internet Web surfers to test and try out such translation servers.

How does a translation portal create a need for translation?

Most MT portals have been set up with a timeout feature that is either based on connection time of use or on file size. This timeout prevents the outright abuse of the free service provided by the translation portal. With a timeout limit of around 10 kilobytes of data (approximately a page of text), the AltaVista Babel Fish is constantly cited as one of the most widely used on-line translation sites. Just the other day, I sat at a demonstration breakfast for one of the more recently established translation portals, the one set up by the MT company Softissimo in Paris (www.reverso.net and www.softissimo.com), where it was announced that the portal already receives ten thousand (10,000) free translation requests per



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month. And by setting up strategic alliances between the MT companies and the search engines (Systran with DEC/Altavista, Softissimo with Voila, etc), the translation portals are simply menu tabs or links on search engine pages that receive thousands and thousands of hits and information requests per day.

Despite the timeout feature, the population at large - a very large user population indeed - is allowed to test the system on short texts. This "testing" mode, or shall I say "tasting" mode, prevents them from turning it into a free productive tool for the purposes of professional work. By tasting the system, the users are encouraged by the "free carrot" to consider procuring a fee-based license for MT software that can either be installed on a stand-alone personal computer or on a client-server platform. In some cases, the free translation portals offer a fee service though an additional link on the Web page.

One of the other characteristics of translation portals is that they are also often equipped only with the general language dictionaries. In order to have access to better and more specialised MT system dictionaries, users are usually required to pay the license fee. One of the more recent trends I have seen is through on-line portals is providing just small handful of specialised dictionaries. This seems to be the "bigger carrot" strategy.

Other than the question of quality, which will improve over time with such systems, one of the other main complaints among general users is the limited number of language translation pairs that are available through portals. In the majority of cases, it is restricted to combinations among the following languages: French, Italian, German, English, Spanish, known as FIGES. A few other languages, like Russian, are also offered through these translation portals, but the choice of languages is often quite

limited. Myself, having been a specialist in Creole languages for the past ten years, I am constantly asked by native speakers of such languages about when a Creole language, like Haitian or Martinican Creole, will be paired up with English or French through a free on-line translation site. And what about the Alaskan and Native American languages in North America? And Swahili, Yoruba, and Berber? It is true that just a handful of languages other than the FIGES group are represented in the list of sites that I have provided further above, but again it remains a small handful for now. There are many revenue building and bearing opportunities available, but it all boils down to time and money. It takes a lot of time to build quality databases that feed into MT systems, and this development for MT systems requires financial and human resource investment that is not trivial. Yet, all that is needed is some investment seed money. Where are all of the investors and venture capitalists who want to extend the "small carrot" strategy to the less-prevalent languages to create a new translation market? If you want a business plan, just get in touch with me and we can see what can make it happen. ■

References:

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