

Obama White House calls for Machine Translation

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Last week, the Executive Office of the President and National Economic Council issued its “Strategy for American Innovation.” Among the recommendations was a call for “automatic, highly accurate and real-time translation between the major languages of the world — greatly lowering the barriers to international commerce and collaboration.” In other words, machine translation (MT) has captured somebody’s attention in the President’s inner circle.

Having an American President cite an advanced language technology as one of the enablers to improve “our quality of life and establish the foundation for the industries and jobs of the future” is not that common an occurrence. So, even though we found this recommendation as the very last bullet in a dense thicket of dozens of other initiatives in a 22-page policy paper, it reinforces our contention that the current administration understands the importance of language both abroad and at home, to both improve the ability of American businesses to engage with foreign buyers and of the U.S. government to better understand the thinking of its partners on the world stage. In January, we wrote that the Obama administration was poised to improve language access on the domestic front (see “Title VI Enforcement to Grow under Obama,”). Now, the administration is turning its attention to the role of language in the country’s ability to compete globally.

The “Obama Innovation Strategy” relies on both the President’s budget and over US\$100 billion of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds targeted for improving the building blocks of American innovation (fundamental research, education, infrastructure, and advanced IT); promoting competitive markets that spur productive businesses; and catalyzing breakthroughs for national priorities (clean energy, advanced vehicle, health care technology, and 21st-century innovations, which is where machine translation shows up).

Is MT ready for this new role in America’s political debate? Interviewees for our recent research into the business case for machine translation showed profound interest and enthusiasm for both the technology and its ability to increase the amount of translated information that they can provide to their customers or constituencies, with faster turnaround time and lower costs. In our report [at MT Summit XII, Ottawa, August 2009], we flagged several areas where suppliers are actively working to improve the technology, including advances in natural language processing and information sciences. More funding for the linguists and scientists working on the technology can only accelerate these advances — and the continuing improvement of MT will bode well for lower barriers to global commerce and collaboration.

From: *Global Watchtower* (Washington, DC: Common Sense Advisory Inc., 27 Sep 2009)

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