

WHAT DO WE EXPECT OF MACHINE TRANSLATION?

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Translation generated by a computer? "Of course: it's child's play". Or alternatively, "Impossible!" Traditionally, people tend to expect everything or nothing of machine translation. And they are wrong in both their expectations.

The first computers coped with numbers so easily that researchers in the 1950s expected similar success with words. Even fully automatic high-quality translation (FAHQT) was said to be just around the corner. It was not, of course, and machine translation fell into disrepute in the mid 1960s, when the US government ended its major research effort. Language is infinitely more subtle and changeable than numbers.

However, things were changing. Political cooperation, technical information and international commerce all expanded, leading to a "translation explosion". The cost of computers fell dramatically, and meanwhile MT improved. It is now used in "real life" language services in Asia, Europe, North America and the Soviet Union, in some places on a large scale since 1970 or earlier. MT is fast, whereas human translation often cannot supply the quantity at the right speed or price.

Even with human assistance, however, MT cannot do everything, and never will. For example, it is uneconomic for many documents, and it cannot reproduce the nuances of literary or legal text. It is best at simpler, more stereotyped text, such as computer manuals, weather bulletins, minutes of meetings. However, these represent a high proportion of the world's translations - and also of the immense latent need, which human translators cannot fill. Where MT is available, it is often used for documents that would never have been translated before; some of these will ultimately need a human translation. So MT can mean More Translation, and more work for translators. A translation service can offer a wider range of products, and the translator's job can be more varied; not just translation, but editing the machine's output, building up its dictionaries, and advising on software development.

Now machine translation is developing rapidly. About twenty systems are sold on the open market, and research too is flourishing. It is an unusually interesting area to work in, whether in research, development or production. Translation students expect it in their courses, and even long established translators can be heard to say, "MT has got to come."