

CompuServe likes Online MT

Translating sixty-thousand words of forum message traffic per day, CompuServe has become one of the largest users of MT in the world today.

CompuServe's experiment with MT appears to be a success. As we reported last year (LIM No. 22), the American online service licensed Intergraph's Dp/Translator, now called Transcend (see related story page 8), and deployed it in the support area of CompuServe's own Macintosh "navigation" program, MacCIM. Every three minutes, English messages are translated into German and French — and vice versa. The originals are appended to the MT output, which is posted unedited in the forums for each language.

When the service was announced last September, there were howls of indignation in FLEFO, CompuServe's foreign language forum, which is the gathering place for many professional translators. They mocked CompuServe's seemingly simplistic approach to the complex issue of multilingual communication; they also saw it as bringing disrepute upon their hallowed vocation. In the early weeks, the FLEFO translators made various forays into the MacCIM forum, where they tried to "trip up" the system by posting it purposely difficult texts.

CompuServe, however, remained undaunted and even set up a section within the MacCIM forum to discuss the MT system. Things soon settled down; the MacCIM users learned to avoid certain kinds of grammatical constructions and CompuServe has been continually adding new entries to the MT system's dictionaries. According to Mary Flanagan, the leader of the CompuServe's Natural Language Technologies Group, some 28,000 words per day are translated by the MT system for the MacCIM forum, making it one of the busiest MT systems in the world.

Based on its success in the MacCIM forum, CompuServe launched a new forum in February, the World Community Forum, which would be a general discussion area for current affairs, culture, and the like, which uses MT for translating from English to French, German, and Spanish — and back again. The volume at the moment is 30,000 words per day. This Forum has also been deemed a success by CompuServe's standards; it generates enough traffic — hence connect time — to justify its existence. As on the MacCIM forum, CompuServe also has a section for messages about the MT output; the company does not shy away from discussion about it, for it does, after all, mean additional connect time. However, Flanagan points out that this tends to be a phenomenon primarily with new users. "After a few weeks," she says, "most of the users get accustomed to the output quality and begin using the translation for the more serious purpose of obtaining information."

More recently, CompuServe launched an online translation service for the four languages with which it has experience. It offers raw MT for us\$0.0813 per word and post-edited output for us\$0.10 per word.

Post-editing services are provided by Linguistic Systems, a translation company based in Cambridge, Mass (USA), which works extensively with freelance translators and post-editors by means of email. Ten cents a word does not allow for much of a profit margin, and in view of the lack of constraints on the input and the corresponding quality of the output, it is hard to see how Linguistic Systems can make much money doing this. According to Flanagan, 200,000 words were translated during the service's first month of operation, 92% of which was requested in raw form. "We see this as another indication that low-quality, info-scanning MT has found its niche," she concludes.

In late 1995, CompuServe plans to add MT to its file finder service. CompuServe has millions of downloadable files in the file libraries of hundreds of forums, and all the files are indexed and accompanied by a short descriptive text of several lines. By translating these texts on the fly, the file libraries should become more accessible to non-English speakers.

CompuServe has been growing rapidly and now counts more than three million members worldwide. According to CompuServe spokesperson Russ Robinson, the service has 400,000 members in Europe, with European membership doubling every year for the past three years. This has been due in part to its becoming more affordable, as the company gradually keeps adding

dialup nodes to its European network. While there are forums where only y French and German are spoken, CompuServe is clearly hoping that by making the English-language forums more accessible to non-English speakers it can leverage the rich content of these forums across the linguistic boundaries of the online world. In doing so, CompuServe is demonstrating the virtues of fully automatic, low-quality MT.

To locate the online translation service on CompuServe, type "go translation."