

Machine translation today - its benefits, limitations and risks

Machine translation versus human translation

A short overview

PART 1 MACHINE TRANSLATION

Most of us nowadays use an online translator like “Google Translate” when a translation is needed, but not everyone is aware of the fact that online systems do not translate as a human would. Usually they just “stitch together” small snippets of text from their massive database of parallel texts, such as professionally translated multilingual EU and UN documents and apply some corrective measures to improve the result. That method has its weaknesses users have to be aware of. Please keep on reading in order to get best results from online translators.

Knowing the do’s and don’ts, online translators today sometimes yield near perfect results. But if you do things you’d better not do, they might not work as they should and produce, in the worst case scenario, only a “salad” of poorly connected words. Remember that **the more similar your text is to a standard template or model text** that others had already created before, the higher the chance the system will translate it correctly! That even goes for current expressions in commercial correspondence, - so whenever you leave the “beaten path”, you may be faced with undesired results.

So here are some useful hints of how you should handle “Google Translate” or other online translation systems:

Use a straightforward and simple style, no contorted phraseology please. Whenever possible, use the **most common words** that describe a given object, situation, etc. The system will always look out for material matching your own, and when it can’t find any, it will improvise, - and it’s doing very poorly at that when compared to a human!

If however, you have **zero knowledge of the language** you want the system to translate into, use only **the most simple and clear sentences you can think of!** Whenever possible avoid idiomatic phrasing and words you might find a more straightforward synonym for. In my opinion, it is an undisputed fact that users themselves are partly to blame when translation systems deliver useless results!

But even then “Google Translate” or similar systems may not find the right equivalent for a word or a group of words, or “screw up” certain sections and even whole sentences, although no error has been made on the user side.

How badly Google performs when acting as an online dictionary many of you may have already experienced. Google search usually displays a preview window on top of the search results for online dictionaries, whenever you input an English word followed by “French”, for instance (leave some space between the words). Now most of the time the displayed results are totally useless!

So the instant success rate of Google here in my opinion is around **20%, compared to 80% +** for good online dictionaries (most are free anyway). Mainly that has to do with the fact that Google, besides having to detect the language of the entered word automatically, is hell-bent on offering us a single choice per entered word, a simplistic method that is bound to produce errors, however good the database may be (and the one Google uses leaves to be desired anyway.) Ample room for improvement here in my opinion for the market leader!

To conclude, my best advice to you is: **Do NOT use automatic translation**, if a) for whatever reason you're unable to check the result or get it checked, if b) there is a risk that a bad translation has the potential to damage your business or reputation, or if c) your text uses uncommon or specialist terminology and/or phrasing.

When writing to friends or acquaintances a few errors are not serious, since everybody uses systems like “Google Translate” today. It might in the worst case cause some merry laughter, but that's not exactly what you would desire your business partners to indulge in, is it?

PART 2 HUMAN TRANSLATION

Now let's see how a human translator works.

He or she **should understand the original text perfectly** before translating it. Having to rely on external help to get to the meaning of the sentence, is not a good start. Naturally, there are some exceptions to this rule. So, if a text is straightforward, an experienced translator can produce a raw translation very quickly, by either directly typing it, or dictating it into a voice /text converter, or even using machine translation, if the quality and clarity of the original text permit it.

One would initially leave out some terms or parts of the text causing difficulties, and check for a solution later.

The translator will then use the Internet for two scenarios: 1) **looking up synonyms**, and 2) **finding a translation for complex words or terms in context**. Websites offering parallel texts for the purpose of searching for certain terms or expressions exist, but there is no absolute guarantee that the displayed results are reliable. The final decision therefore rests with the translator at all times.

So, if a complicated term unknown to the translator cannot be found in context, the translation is risky. This can happen for instance with medical or legal terminology, if the translator is not an expert in the field.

The raw text is then reread and gradually improved while going along. Once convinced that it has been well converted, it will be put aside for some time. Later the translator will check the text again, controlling consistency and hunting down smaller errors that might have crept in during the translation process.

If the schedule is not too tight, one reads the text again the next day. Sometimes you notice things you haven't before.

Finally, it might be said that while translating, the human brain works largely **by association and by using ready "templates" stored in the brain**, and also seems to have an innate talent for syntax that machines do not yet possess. In addition to that, a trained human brain will even understand partially mutilated or very poor quality text.

Probably this has to do with the fact that we human beings possess superior pattern processing in order to identify threats or enemies, when our ancestors still had to survive in a hostile environment. And it's that particular talent automatic translation systems have to do without (for now).

So, to conclude: I am in no way against using machine translations, but you have to be aware of the limitations and risks involved. If a bad translation may negatively impact your business, your academic standing or your reputation in general, it's better to pass it on to a professional translator, even if that may be expensive at times.

Also read the longer version of this article [here](#)