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Does Machine Translation Really Produce Translations?

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Abstract

I will try to answer the question of whether Machine Translation (MT) can be considered a full translation process. I argue that, instead, it should be seen as part of a process performed by translators, in which MT plays a fundamental support role. The roles of translators and MT in the translation process is presented in an analysis that get its elements from Translation Studies and Translation Process Research.

1 Introduction

This presentation is based on my research, which covers both Translation Studies and Machine Translation, and on my practice of more than 20 years as a translator, a translation company owner and a translator trainer. The main results of my research are my PhD thesis and KAITER, my project as an EDGE Fellow at the ADAPT Centre.

2 Translation and post-editing

Post-editing (PE) is a term used by the industry for a process in which translators work over a version of a source text (ST) in the target language, created by an MT system. One should discuss to what extent is this version an actual translation.

2.1 Definition of translation

Translation is a text transformation process by which a text's communication effectiveness is improved by replicating the text in a language code different from the original one. For this improvement of effectiveness to be reached, the process must be as efficient as possible.

This definition of translation has one clear implication for MT: if it does not improve the effectiveness of the ST, and if it is not more efficient than human translation, it does not fulfil the requirements of a translation process. So, every MT product that requires subsequent work by a translator is an evidence that MT is not a complete translation process.

Some of the practices in MT research cannot hold against this view. Monolingual PE, for example, cannot guarantee the effectiveness of communication of the ST, since it has no access to the ST.

2.2 Post-editing is not just revision or editing

When they are post-editing, translators work on segments that may require that only a few words need editing, but also on segments that imply total rewriting. Besides, they work with results from not only MT but also Translation Memories. So, they need to read several text extracts in both languages, while the reliability of the suggestions they receive is not established. To guarantee the quality that is requested, translators also need to resort to reliable external sources of reference. In this complex work environment, translators must be very efficient readers, and they need to make good and fast decisions. This means that post-editors must be specialised translators, which again shows that MT is not a full translation process.

3 Conclusion

A clear understanding of the different dimensions of translation and PE, as specialised processes, shows that MT, more than an autonomous translation process, achieves its best potential as a support for human translation and editing tasks.

References

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