Translation Technology and the Translator

John Hutchins

A translator's reaction to MT in 1949

... translation is an art; something which at every step involves personal choice between uncodifiable alternatives; not merely direct substitutions of equated sets of symbols but choices of values dependent for their soundness on the whole antecedent education and personality of the translator.

the resulting literary style would be atrocious and fuller of "howlers" and false values than the worst that any human translator produces.

[computers] might be made to turn out a rough draft which a competent editor versed in the subject matter, though unacquainted with the *foreign language*, could then pull into shape.

[But] the machine would need to be given an enormous memory not only for variants of terms but for rules of accidence and syntax.

(J.E.Holmström: **Report on interlingual scientific and technical dictionaries**. Paris: Unesco, 1951.)

The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak

February 1958:

A Firm experimenting with an electronic brain designed to translate English into Russian fed it with the words: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

The machine responded with a sentence in Russian characters which was handed to an expert linguist.

"It says," he reported, "that the whisky is agreeable but the meat has gone bad."

(A.G.Readett, in: **Linguists' Review**, NS vol.1 pt.2, February   1958, 27-28)

E.H.Ullrich 1956

Before the war, I lived for a number of years in Paris and found the standard of translation in the Press poor. Perhaps the popular Press is the most attractive outlet for mechanical translations, because it does not really matter whether these are right or wrong, and amusing versions such as 'the ghost wills but the meat is feeble' might make mechanical translation into a daily feature as indispensable as the cross-word puzzle. ...

(E.H.Ullrich, in: **Proceedings of the Institute of Electrical Engineers**, vol. 103B (suppl.3), 1956, p.474.)

Machine translation on the Internet

Translation services (raw output or lightly post-edited)
    Systran, Globalink, CompuServe, Logos
    Atlas (Niftyserve), Pivot (PC-Van), JICST

Short messages (electronic mail)
    CompuServe

Web pages
    Globalink, LogoVista, Systran
    Netscape/ej, PENSEE for Internet, Dr.SURF

Multilingual database searching
    AVENTINUS, etc.

Spoken messages
    ATR, Verbmobil