

From life-long enemy to new market – a translation service provider view of MT

Don Shin

1-Stop Translation USA, LLC

don@1stoptr.com

I still remember the day clearly—it was in July of 2009. I was standing in front of 150 translation service provider owners. My presentation was about the future of translation industry. Knowing that machine translation had been a life-long enemy of our industry, I tried to be as reserved and as subtle as possible. I simply expressed that MT was not the ultimate evil or ‘he who must not be named.’ It might increase our efficiency and someday we may even use MT just like we are using translation memory every day. However, the response was very cold. Apart from for a couple of companies, the rest were saying that they were neither using MT nor were even thinking of using it.

But the changes have been dramatic. Within just one year, I received several calls from other translation company owners who received inquiries regarding their MT capacity and experience.

The real ice breaker was the AMTA’s conference in Denver in October 2010. As far as I know, it was the first time that ATA (American Translators Association) was officially invited to the conference. For the convenience of ATA members, it was held in the same city right after the closing day of the ATA conference. I participated in the conference along with my friend and client, Jiri Stejskal, who was the president of ATA at that time.

It was a real eye opener. These are a few points I learned in that conference: 1) There would not be just one MT engine that could translate better than the rest in all languages and all subjects. Instead, there would be thousands of MT engines. Someday, each company may possibly even have their own MT engine per language pair. 2) Instead of simply becoming one of the tools to be used in a translation process, it would generate many different jobs, businesses and even create new industries; just like the invention of a car had led to the creation of a giant car industry. 3) Further developments of MT would not only be the jobs of engineers or scientists. It would heavily depend on linguists or translation companies like us.

Since then, in almost every conference MT has been one of the most common and popular topics. More and more translation companies are proudly saying ‘we handle MT.’ At the Globalization and Localization Association conference held in Lisbon, Portugal in March 2011, almost one third of the companies were doing or had done MT related projects. For our company in particular, although we’re only working with Asian languages, which is still a lot harder than European languages for machines to translate, almost every month, we perform MT editing jobs.

The majority of the jobs that we’re currently handling are post editing of MT output. Some companies provide MT engine training services or cleaning corpus; other companies started to use MT to save costs and improve speed. One SLV (Single Language Vendor) owner with 30 full time translators told me that he was expecting 20-30 percent savings once he finished his custom MT engine training. The most notable sign to me was the birth of a new service company like Pangeanic (<http://www.pangeanic.com/>). They provide training of MT engine service for clients. I do believe that this is a very promising new ‘blue ocean’ in our industry.

Very soon we will see more and more new services related to MT. As a translation company specializing in Asian languages, we’re planning to develop an MT engine for Simplified and Traditional Chinese. In our industry, currently most materials that need to be translated into Traditional Chinese are already available in

Simplified Chinese. Then why not translate from Simplified Chinese directly instead of English? In the coming years, more and more MT engines will be developed and sold by translation companies rather than software companies. Also, within the translation companies ourselves, we will be able to see new job titles such as MT editor, monolingual translator, MT trainer, Corpus miner and translation memory cleaning or specialist.

I do not know exactly where the industry will go, but one thing for sure is that the changes will come even faster compared to the last 3-4 years.

For more information on machine translation and the latest innovations in the industry, go to the Globalization and Localization Association website, www.gala-global.org. GALA is the largest localization industry association worldwide and is a great resource with articles, explanations and webinars on machine translation.