

“Utility” vs. “Eloquence” for measures of Quality

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I recently read that “utility is valued over eloquence as a measure of translation quality”(1) by some of the big TECH companies entering the translation and interpreting field, including Intel, Microsoft, Asia Online and Spoken Translation. The Taus report that talked about that was specifically referring to the "coming of age" of "real-time multilingual chat", which is part of an entirely new array of products that are already being offered by high-tech translation automation companies; these new products are changing the landscape of bilingual and multilingual output (and translation/interpreting) in the Global Village of the 21st Century.

If this is the new industry trend, “quality” will become a “value added” –not a core requirement– sought by "some" (read "few") companies. Thus, the new industry concept of “utility” is becoming more important than “eloquence” –which to date has been our measure of quality– and this paradigm shift will totally change the roles of the players in this industry, including us, professional translators and interpreters.

I will not discuss here the "good or evil" nature of the recent automation developments in the translation industry, as there are fervent supporters of one and the other position. My view is that the 21st Century has arrived and many translators and interpreters seem to be at odds with that simple fact. So, in my opinion, fighting technology will not serve the cause of the industry. Unless we become part – and an active part – of the conversation, we will not have a say in its development.

We need to start participating in the technological revolution by voicing our stand (other than mere "opposition", which will just delay the inevitable), and making POSITIVE contributions so that we make ourselves indispensable to and remain part of the industry.... otherwise, the geeks will try –and probably succeed in time – in replicating what we do (remember quality is no longer the driver for a large portion of the users of the outputs of our industry).

I believe the tech industry has been rather successful at creating algorithms and software and have been pretty good at the basics of language transfer. They have not figured out how to transfer content yet, but they are getting there. As I see it, the fact that most of the software still outputs low-quality products is just a matter of "infancy". This child will "mature" faster than you think. Few people at the height of the industrial revolution believed that automation would cause the displacement of millions of manufacturing jobs. So we, standing at the beginning of the digital/mobile communication revolution,

must learn from history and anticipate the changes that will most probably happen, and participate in them today, so that we may partake in their advancements and help drive and shape their future.

The paradigm shift comes about from the fact that the truths we held sacred in translation and interpreting may be on the verge of disappearing. Mainstream needs, the advent of mobile technologies, the incursion of the TECH industry in the world of translation and interpreting is changing the basic parameters of the entire translation and interpreting industry. The basic assumptions we hold dear and which are comfortably embedded in our way of doing things are starting to fade away. Winners of battles write the history of those battles. I certainly would like to be part of those who write the history of translation and interpreting in the 21st century.

Just as the debate in the translation industry centers around the use of TM and MT, the debate in the interpreting industry is around the use of phone-interpreting, video-interpreting, web-based-interpreting, and interpreting for mobile digital users, among others. I believe the discussion cannot continue being "if" but must shift to "how" we will participate (i.e., not if we should use these technologies, but how can we use them and what do we need as an industry for consistency). We have to be aware of the changes occurring in the industry if we want to remain relevant. Any change we wish for (or wish to avoid) is ours to fight for.

So, in this fast-pace world of the 21st Century, "instant" is the concept of choice in service provision, and based on this, the larger companies coming from the software and hardware industries, from the video and gaming industries, are penetrating the language industries. They are having initial success as the newcomer competitors of traditional translators and interpreters. Their final products are years away from the "Eloquence" by which we have measured our products during thousands of years but rather, they are now striving to achieve "Utility" -- the usefulness of instant access that these automated services are providing.

The silver lining is that, although these providers of technical solutions are slowly but surely gaining wider margins of market share, in doing so they have expanded the actual market size to levels unimaginable just a few years ago. So, although they are taking more and more of the market as a percentage, their own presence has multiplied the marketplace several times in size (and will continue doing so). In this way, translators and interpreters are in higher demand than they have ever been in history and our services are being recognized by mainstream as "vital" to the functioning of this new multilingual and multicultural world.

The crumbling down of geographic barriers allows for the provision of services in ways we could never have anticipated. The downside: we are no longer an elite group of intellectuals or artists but are now part of a larger group of artisans. As always in

history, there is room for those who wish to remain being artists and intellectuals, to continue rendering high-quality services to the few buyers who will continue to exist. The rest of us will now be a mainstream trade, maybe at the level of law or medicine (i.e., there is the Judge and there is the paralegal, there is the surgeon and there is the home health attendant.... and everything in between).

The future is here. There is no such thing as “it will not happen”. It is happening. Translators are being replaced by machine translation at an alarming speed. Those translators who fail to see the trend will be left without a job in a matter of a decade. Post-MT editing is strongly becoming the trend in the “normal” industry and now, with this latest concept --changing eloquence for utility-- the trend will change faster than ever as machine translation becomes more and more common, easier to access and “acceptable” in terms of its output. What I am reading here is that the end-users of translation products are accepting a mediocre product provided it is cheap, fast (machine-translation produced) and relatively accurate (the last hurdle yet to be achieved by new technologies, but fast on the way to getting there).

Now then, Interpreting still may hold a couple of decades more of life “as we know it” because it is a bit more complex... or is it? I have lately seen text to voice produce some amazing results... yes, one language only, but once they figure out the "magic" element – and they will (the question is When) – then development will go ballistic....

So, it is predictable that in the future (which in many places is today), people will not care about construction of the sentences or grammar or inherent meaning of the source language, or even nuances. They will just want to get the “general idea” and that is all they want. Well, at least the larger portion of buyers of translation and interpreting services. Of course there will be many others out there that will still strive for quality. Moreover, for which quality becomes even MORE important than before (thankfully, the healthcare industry seems to be one of them.... the question is... until when? Market forces drive industries, whether we like it or not).

So, for me, the issue is, how are we, the professional interpreters and translators, helping to shape the industry we will be working in? Other than complaining, what are we doing? Other than opposing progress, what positive contributions are we presenting? What levels of "association with" the developers of the new world are we engaging? Where is our strength as part of the "knowledge" pool of services in the world? How can we harness that power?

As I see it, the extraordinary growth of machine translation resources is evidence of the exponential improvement in quality in the past decade. I do not use the term exponential lightly. Growth and improvements in our industry are being exponential. So, I believe that quality translation might be achieved in one or two decades with machine translation. Quality interpreting might take a little longer, but not too much.

Yes, I know this is blasphemy. But believe me, it is reality. Once upon a time, about 15 years ago I thought Translation Memories were garbage and would go nowhere. I thought this day, when TMs are almost a requirement for the job, would never come. Well, it is here. So, let's face reality. There are some robots in Japan that are already capable of basic interpreting. Yes, very basic. Just as TM was so basic 10 years ago.

The future of the translation industry is being taken over by the big software companies that are creating software capable of penetrating the "magic" of translation. Once they get there, it will be like any other industry of the 19th century. Replicate, replicate, replicate.

Therefore, here is my proposal: We, the original translators and interpreters, who understand and drive "Eloquence" and not just "Utility" – we – must become very active in designing the strategies of our own future. We have to unite to create international infrastructures that support the "Eloquence" and not just the "Utility" -- but not fighting with the software giants, that is a lost cause, rather providing alternatives to improve their products. Common infrastructure and common protocols should be our mantra now as an industry. A dispersed group of individuals will not achieve much.

What is the profession going to look like in 20 years? We have to start answering that question from a perspective of the current reality (mobile millenials) and not from the perspective of what we would "ideally" believe "should" be. **Should** does not work any more. **Could** is here to stay. We need to wake up to our new reality as a profession and set out to design the future that **could** be for us in this new Global Village of the 21st Century.

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http://www.translationautomation.com/joomla15/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=680&catid=3&Itemid=85