

The translator's workbench and beyond: off-line add-ons to on-line tools

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Abstract

The advent of new information technologies at an ever increasing pace opens up new avenues for promising developments in the field of language (and translation) processing. Simultaneously, the drastic drop in prices of the technology turns prospects into affordable wonder-solutions, which tend to live up to expectations of actual users only to a limited extent, and probably even less so to those of cost-sensitive managers. Progress in natural language processing research has been sustained in recent decades, but it would be fallacious to make believe that solutions are available off the shelf to do anything with language that needs to be done in today's communication environment, in no time and at no cost. While the irrational, often summary, dismissal by traditionalist circles of technological support which may help translators in their daily work is outdated, it is necessary to depict a clear picture of the current situation and the characteristics of the present day working conditions : good quality translation will continue to rely on the skills of trained, widely-read and skilled human translators. The difference with past practice lies probably in the fact that the resources indispensable for the work will be more easily available and at a lower cost, that the mass of information which can be used will increase dramatically in scope, that repetitive tasks will be facilitated by the use of robots which never get tired or bored and can keep on sustaining search processes long after a human brain would have ceased to function properly. What will not change, on the other hand, is that human translators can translate only so many pages a day with a consistent reliability, and that gains in performance in this respect will be necessarily limited. As a corollary, expected cost savings will become reality only if a number of preconditions are met : efficient use of interactive tools will be dependent on proper training of the users; constraints inherent to the automated systems will have to be understood and accepted; reasonable expectation targets will have to be taught after discounting promotional mirages; long, difficult preparations will have to be undertaken to pave the way for the implementation of the new technologies. Prospects for savings will eventually depend on the quality of the archive materials to be used and the corresponding level of investment required to recycle them for electronic processing, the compliance with recognized standards for newly produced materials and the resulting re-usability of such materials for a variety of purposes. Only on that basis will it be possible to embark on a large-scale automatic processing of text materials for efficiently supporting translation work, but also for document indexing, information management at large and global communication development for the benefit of the world community.

