

THE PLACE OF MT IN AN IN-HOUSE TRANSLATION SERVICE

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1 INTRODUCTION

At the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), MT service is approaching its tenth anniversary. A special combination of characteristics have placed this operation in a class by itself. One of these characteristics is that the MT software (SPANAM and ENGSPAN and supporting programs) has been developed in-house by an international organization. PAHO was motivated by the dual need to: (1) meet the translation needs of its secretariat, and (2) disseminate information in its member countries. Thus MT at PAHO was conceived from the start as a public service.

A second characteristic of the PAHO MT operation is that system development and practical utilization take place in the same environment. Developers and posteditors work side by side. This means that posteditors not only learn to update the dictionaries but also have the opportunity to suggest improvements in the algorithm. At the same time, the development team provides support for posteditors through explanations and advanced-level dictionary updates. As a result, there is constant cross-fertilization between the theoretical and the practical. Moreover, precisely because of the setting just described, improvements are introduced on an ongoing basis; new versions are placed in service not as periodic "releases" but whenever they are needed, often from one day to the next. The details and advantages of this configuration have been reported elsewhere by Vasconcellos (1) and Vasconcellos and Leon (2).

The MT operation at PAHO, used for the Spanish-English and English-Spanish combinations, has now been fully integrated into the general translation service, and herein lies yet another of its distinctions. MT is used to process about two-thirds of the total production flow. It is not reserved for isolated applications. On the contrary, it enters into the picture even when the strictest standards of quality are being imposed, and it tackles an impressive variety of texts—variety not only in subject matter but also in purpose and text type. According to records kept over a period of 8.5 months in 1987-1988, MT was used on 79.4% of all the jobs received for translation from Spanish into English and 60% of the volume from English into Spanish (excluding jobs from and into Portuguese and French plus a few others, which together represented about 15% of the total received). Our experience has shown that the intensity of MT utilization has been related to the place that has been assigned to MT in the administrative structure.

2 OPTIONS FOR MT MANAGEMENT

Over the years, the PAHO MT operation has been managed both as an independent service and as a service fully merged with human translation in which incoming work is screened by a specialist in machine translation.

2.1 MT as an Independent Service

For its first five years, from early 1980 until the end of 1984, the PAHO MT operation was entirely separate from the translation service that already existed in the Organization. MT output, revised and presented as final translation, was offered in one language direction (Spanish-English), and the team included, in addition to the personnel working on development, one full-time posteditor/dictionary worker who was an experienced translator. Offices within the Organization that wanted MT service could request it at no cost. Most of the applications involved texts—often parallel texts—whose original version necessarily had to be word-processed to begin with. Spontaneous feedback received at the time indicated considerable satisfaction with the post-edited product, and volume increased nearly tenfold, from 90,153 words in 1980 to 848,506 in 1984. That year, for the first time, work was also delivered in the English-Spanish combination, amounting to a total of 304,410 words. One of the main advantages of this mode of operation was that the "clients" were free to use the service or not as they wished. One of the disadvantages, on the other hand, was that expensive resources continued to be spent on traditional translation when a more cost-effective option was available.

In a reorganization at the end of 1984, MT and HT were brought together under one management, but the clients who had used MT service in the past continued to request it directly.

2.2 MT Fully Integrated with HT

Starting in October 1987, it was decided that all incoming requests for translation would be centrally screened by a person who was knowledgeable about MT. As a result of this change, there was a large increase in MT participation, and the systems are now being fully exercised. It is now the policy of the Organization to use MT as the primary means of translation for Spanish-English and English-Spanish. This means that resources can be maximized. Work is assigned on a case-by-case basis, depending on all the factors involved, including the individual strengths, skills, and preferences of the translators. Some of them postedit almost exclusively, while others work only as human translators and some do both. Resistance has been encountered from a few of the clients, but their problems are almost always traceable to causes other than MT. The proof of the pudding is that in feedback collected during the 8.5-month period there was 85.1% satisfaction with MT compared with 78.1% for HT, and reservations and complaints represented 2.3% of the volume handled by MT vs. 2.5% for HT. We therefore feel that our present arrangement makes the best use of available talent and resources while at the same time the clients are better served.

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