Freelance translators and machine translation:

An investigation of perceptions, uptake, experience and training needs

Heather Fulford

Business School

Loughborough University

Loughborough

Leics. LE11 3TU

UK

Email h.fulford@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

An exploratory study has been initiated to determine the uptake of machine translation (MT) among UK freelance translators, to assess their perceptions and experience of it, and to identify their perceived MT training needs. A preliminary analysis of findings suggests that, although the uptake of MT has, to date, been rather low in the freelance translation community, there was among the respondents a keen interest, to learn more about MT and to explore the possibility of using it more in their translation assignments. The respondents expressed a desire for MT training, with a particular preference for self-directed training material allowing experimentation with MT on 'real' assignments for their clients.

Introduction

Learners of machine translation (MT) systems in the UK today are likely to include not only trainee translators (typically undergraduate or post-graduate students undertaking translation studies degrees), but also existing translators, often operating in a freelance translation context. With regard to MT, these practitioners will tend to fall into one of three categories:

- Their translation training did not contain an MT training element.

- Their translation training contained training in MT theory and discussion of the 'future possibility' of MT, but no real exposure to, or hands-on experience with, MT systems.

- Their translation training contained practical hands-on training in the use of MT.

A uniting factor between translators in each of these categories is the high probability, given the recent progress in MT, that they will encounter MT in their professional work in one way or another, whether it be through being assigned post-editing work on texts translated using an MT system, or being requested by a client to use an MT system to produce draft translations for 'information-only' purposes, or whether it be that they

117

decide for themselves to incorporate the use of MT into their working environments.

Traditionally translators have had a reputation for being rather sceptical regarding the efficacy of MT, with views being reported that range from mild amusement through to open hostility and fear. Such perceptions of MT are unlikely to aid the effective learning of MT, and are likely also to impede the successful introduction of MT into the professional translator's working environment.

In this paper, an exploratory investigation of freelance translators is presented in which their level of MT uptake has been determined, their views on MT assessed, and their MT training needs identified.

Comparisons have been made between each of the three categories of translator outlined above, and relationships considered between levels of IT literacy/sophistication and perceptions of, and attitudes towards, MT.

The underlying purpose of this exploratory study is to identify the post-qualification training needs of freelance translators in the MT area, with a view to feeding this information back to training providers, to relevant professional bodies (i.e. language and translation associations) and to MT software designers and developers. It is envisaged that the findings of the study will help ensure that training material is appropriately tailored to the requirements of practitioners, and that, furthermore, training providers and software developers are aware of translators' current perceptions of MT and of the training they require as an integral component of their ongoing professional development.

This research forms part of a larger-scale ongoing study into the current working practices of freelance translators.

Methodology

When this part of the study of UK-based freelance translators was initiated, it was envisaged that it would, in the first instance, comprise an exploratory investigation involving taking 'soundings' of translators' views on, and experiences with, MT. These soundings have, to date, been taken through the medium of discussions, or small focus groups with freelance translators. In these focus groups a structured questionnaire was used in which the following issues were raised with the translators:

- their current perceptions of, and attitudes towards, MT;

- their knowledge of, and experience with, contemporary MT systems;

- use being made of MT in their current working environment;

- their views on adopting MT;

- their perceived barriers to adopting MT;

- difficulties they have experienced in learning to use MT systems;

- their perceived training needs in MT and preferred training delivery modes (e.g. face-to-face tuition, self-directed learning, distance learning).

The discussions and focus groups were recorded, and notes were also made by one of the investigators.

These discussions were held with freelance translators attending various translation seminars and workshops in the UK in late 2001 and early 2002. To date, a total of 30 translators have participated in the study. The study

has so far included five focus group discussions.

Having conducted this exploratory study, a fuller investigation is now planned involving a larger sample of translators, and comprising a more extensive discussion and analysis of the issues raised by the translators.

Preliminary findings

In this section, the preliminary findings of the exploratory study are presented, beginning with a brief overview of the translators in the sample, and focussing particularly on the comments made by respondents regarding their perceived training needs in the area of MT.

Profile of translators:

Approximately half of the translators in the sample had been in practice for over six years, whereas the other half were newcomers to the profession, having between one and five years' professional translation experience. In terms of translator training, the sample was mixed: a few stated that they had learned the professional –'on the job' after graduating with a language degree, others had undertaken a postgraduate university degree course in translation, and still others had obtained a postgraduate-level translation qualification awarded by a professional body.

With regard to IT familiarity and usage, translators in the sample were all employing a broad range of general office/administrative software in the course of their professional duties, including word processing software, spreadsheets, presentation/graphics software, databases, and financial/ accounting packages.

Internet facilities (notably, electronic mail, the world wide web, and newsgroups) were also widely used. Only 10 (33%) of the translators in the

sample were employing terminology management systems and 6 (20%) were using translation memory software.

MT uptake:

Just two (7%) of the translators in the sample were actively using MT in their work. A further 8 (27%) translators stated that they had 'occasionally' made use of web-based MT systems to produce an initial rough draft of a translation, or to 'get ideas' for producing a translation, before polishing the output manually ready for presentation to a client.

Just over half (16, 53%) of the translators in the sample had undertaken post-editing work for clients of documents translated using MT systems, and eight (27%) of those translators claimed that they undertook such editing work on a frequent and regular basis.

Of those undertaking post-editing work, most stated that, whilst they found the task rather less rewarding than translating documents from scratch, they found a certain amount of satisfaction in 'correcting' the work of an MT system. They indicated that such post editing work gave useful insights into the capabilities of current MT systems.

Five (17%) of the translators in the sample commented that they had used MT in previous in-house translation posts.

MT training:

With regard to the three categories of translator identified earlier, those in the present sample were divided as shown in the following table. The table indicates that only 7 (23%) of the translators in the sample had received any 'hands on' experience of MT systems during their translation training.

In further discussion with those translators who had received some hands-on experience, it became clear that their hands on experience had been rather limited in that it had tended to involve really only brief opportunities to experiment or 'play' with demonstration packages, rather than use fully-fledged MT systems. Moreover, this experimenting was often limited only to demonstration or sample texts, rather than more realistic translation assignments.

The table further shows that the vast majority of translators (21, 70%) had only received a 'theoretical' exposure to MT, that is to say, they had learned, for example, about how MT is designed to operate, about how its use might be envisaged in the future, and had perhaps been shown a few illustrations of output to demonstrate both the capabilities and limitations of MT.

Table 1: MT training

Training type	No. of translators (%)
No MT	2 (7%)
MT 'in theory'	21 (70%)
MT 'hands on'	7 (23%)

Views on MT:

Among the translators in the sample, there was mix of views about MT, its capabilities, its potential, and its viability. The predominant view was one of scepticism. When probed on this issue, it seemed that this scepticism was founded not so much on a fear that MT systems might pose a threat to the role of the human translator, but rather on a belief that the task of translation is too complex to be able ever to be undertaken effectively by a machine. Those who were most dismissive about the capabilities of MT were, perhaps inevitably, largely those having had the least exposure to it.

Choosing MT:

Despite the high level of scepticism among the translators, the majority in the sample expressed an interest, or indeed need, to be given guidance or training in the area of determining cases suitable for MT and those not.

A number of respondents further suggested that even if they had access to MT, their problem would be that of knowing really when best to use it. Furthermore, concern was expressed about the danger of wasting time or other resources trying to use MT for an assignment and then finding that it was inappropriate or inadequate for the task at hand.

During the discussions, a number of translators commented that cost and time factors constituted key barriers to their MT adoption. It was suggested, for example, that accurate information was needed on the speed of obtaining a return on one's investment in an MT system, as well as details on the time required for learning to use such a system effectively and efficiently.

Despite the doubts and uncertainties raised by the translators about MT and the queries they had about its efficacy, it was evident overall from the discussions in the focus groups that the majority of translators in the sample were keen to learn more about MT in order that they could consider in a more reasoned way whether to adopt it for use in their own working environments.

The MT training 'wish list':

When asked about MT training needs or wants, the translators in the sample made a range of suggestions and comments, the key ones on their MT training 'wish list' being as follows.

- Translators expressed a desire for opportunities to try out current MT systems. Here, it was

stressed that they wanted much more than a software demonstration, or a 'trial version' to experiment with, but rather the opportunity to practice using an MT system with 'real-world' translation assignments, most especially including samples of documents they typically receive from their existing clients.

- Translators in the sample also suggested during the focus group discussions that sets of guidelines would be useful on choosing an appropriate MT system for adoption in a freelance working environment, and on deciding whether to choose to use MT for a given translation assignment.

- On the specific issue of MT training modes and mechanisms, a number of the translators in the sample indicated that short courses or seminars would be of most use to them. The majority suggested that self-directed learning packages, or home study courses would be most suited to their working environments. Several commented here that such home study would enable them to experiment more extensively than in conventional training course environments with MT on a range of assignments, document types, subject areas, and so on.

Having presented a brief summary of the key points raised in the focus groups with freelance translators in the sample, a discussion of the findings is presented in the next section.

Discussion & recommendations

With regard to training, it is evident from the findings of this preliminary study that translators feel a need for training in the use of MT, and that such training must go beyond the level of introductory software demonstrations to incorporate more extensive exposure to MT. It is evident too that for a number of translators ignorance of MT and its current capabilities breeds fear and scepticism, and arguably a more comprehensive exposure to MT would help allay such fears.

Whilst a growing number of universities offer postgraduate courses in translation in which training in the use of translation tools generally, and the adoption of MT in particular, play a significant part, it seems there is scope for additional training resources to support existing freelance translators. As the translators in this sample have noted, such training needs to be flexible in order that it can be undertaken in conjunction with the running of a freelance translation business.

In the light of the findings of this study, a number of recommendations are put forward below for consideration by the various stakeholders in the MT community, namely training providers, translators, system designers and developers, and language associations and professional bodies for translators. These recommendations are:

- more widespread provision of short courses, or taster courses, in the use of MT to enable freelance translators to update their knowledge of MT and to gain hands on experience of using current MT systems;

- provision of self-directed MT training material for use by freelance translators in their home working environments;

- a practitioner-oriented (i.e. translator-oriented) comprehensive web site giving an

overview and evaluation of current MT systems, and containing guidelines on the adoption of MT. Such a site could also usefully contain links to software vendor sites and demonstration versions of MT systems.

It is anticipated that the implementation of these recommendations could lead to the provision of a useful set of flexible training resources that would enable translators to keep up to date with the field of MT and to assist them in part of their ongoing professional development.

It is further envisaged that benefits from these initiatives might be realised by other stakeholders in the MT community. For example, universities (which are perhaps arguably the organisations best-placed to provide MT training) might generate income from using their staff and their MT training laboratories to deliver more short courses for translators. Furthermore, the opportunity to train existing translators might provide useful insights into the use of MT in real-world scenarios, and lead to further research and development initiatives.

Moreover, if bodies such as the EAMT and BCS could help provide self-directed learning material, or help establish practitioner-oriented MT web sites, perhaps in collaboration with professional language and translation associations, the membership of each organisation might be enriched by a greater degree of collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and software designers and developers. In addition, such collaboration may lead in time to the improved design and capability of MT systems.

Conclusions & further research

In this study, some soundings have been taken of existing freelance translators and their views on, and experience with, MT. The findings suggest that, although the uptake of MT has, to date, been rather low in the freelance translation community, there was among the respondents a keen interest, to learn more about MT and to explore the possibility of using it more in their translation assignments. The respondents expressed a desire for MT training, with a particular preference for self-directed training material allowing experimentation with MT on 'real' assignments for their clients.

Some recommendations have been made for the provision of MT training resources for freelance translators, including web-based. It has been suggested that the provision of such resources could have the added benefit of encouraging greater collaboration between practitioners, academics, and software designers and developers.

The next stage proposed for the study is to begin designing and piloting suitable resources for the freelance translator community based on the findings and recommendations of the present exploratory study.