Practical uses of MT at Global Language Translations and Consulting: A Case Study of MT use for profit

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Abstract

This document describes the use of MT at GLTaC and provides an approach to determining if offering MT services is right for you. There is no single answer or approach to providing MT services so this is just one way an LSP has chosen to provide MT services.

1 Introduction

Global Language Translations and Consulting, Inc. (hereafter referred to as GLTaC), was formed in 1996, internal to the Dow Corning Corporation.

This heritage embedded MT into the corporate culture from the beginning since Dow Corning was an early adopter of SYSTRAN and the founder of GLTaC provided much of the material SYSTRAN used for their Korean language pairs.

GLTaC determined early on the three levels of service we offer:

> Pure MT – MT
> MT with human post-edit – MAT
> Human Translation – HT

We identify MAT as Machine Aided Translation, but it could also be called Machine Assisted Translation and is differentiated from CAT, which implies the use of a Tranlation Memory tool. The lines between categories are blurring as technology combines TM and MT in the same package.

2 MT Market

Understanding the GLTaC approach requires understanding the MT market. This is obviously an area for debate but for the purposes of this paper, I will split the MT market into the following divisions:

1. Bulk MT Customers (HP, Intel, etc.)
2. Data Mining Customers (Law Firms, etc.)
3. On Demand MT Customers (individuals)

There may be other segments but generally the split involves whether you intend on publishing the output from the MT software or use it with no desire to publish. I often claim there should be a warning on MT software similar to medicine, "For Internal Use Only." This is not meant to rancor those who are using it for publishing material, but that is a very different market with a different approach that will not be covered in this paper.

The fear of HT being replaced by MT is vastly overblown and all you need to do is administer the "Will" test to prove the point. Until such time as you are comfortable with having your Last Will and Testament translated by MT for official filing, then MT will not replace HT. The way to view the MT market is as an entirely separate market from the HT market. Most MT jobs would not be possible by HT, such as data mining thousands of documents and providing a translated summary of specific data fields in a week or so, or translating manuals of thousands of pages on a weekly basis at a fraction of a cent per word.

The market served by GLTaC is number 3. I have heard anecdotally that there is a lot of money waiting to be made in markets 1 and 2, but given the amount of resources available and effort required, those are beyond the scope of our goals at GLTaC currently.

2.1 Performance

One of the challenges in presenting this topic is providing enough detail without giving away the farm. Having said that, since 2002, GLTaC has done close to $1,000,000 in MT and MAT work broken out as follows:

Type	Number of Jobs	Revenue
MT	3,092	$439,246
MAT	1,240	$495,675
Total:	4,332	$934,921

As seen by the table, there is considerable revenue from offering MT and post-edited MT services. The pricing is non-linear so you will not be able to develop a pricing model from the above figures. In order to offer these services at a profit, the pricing model will need to provide enough margin to cover the amount of time and effort it takes to do a task. This sounds like a Business 101 course, and to a large extent, it is. What may come as a surprise is the number of businesses that do not function this way.

2.2 What is involved?

Most customers view MT as a button push. This perception will hurt you far more than help you because if it were that easy, people would put their documents through Google or some other free on-line service.

In reality, what you receive is quite often illegible, not in text format and almost unusable. Now you are in the world of OCR software and pre-editing files. If you can feel the cost going up and the time extending, then you are on the right track.

You put extraordinary effort into the job to deliver in a relatively short time (compared with an HT file) and pat yourself on the back for a job well done, when the customer comes back disappointed in the result. They were expecting Human Translation quality for a Machine Translation price and turnaround time. The next question from the customer is, "Will you certify that?" As you wipe the tears of frustration or laughter from your eyes, you wonder what was the expectation?

2.3 Customer Expectations

The difference between a satisfied MT customer and a dissatisfied one comes down to expectations. You know very well what level of quality you can deliver at a given price point, but your customer has no idea or the wrong idea. The same for turnaround time. How you set those expectations will make a huge difference in your success or failure. One of the biggest mistakes you can make is over-promising what the technology can do. If your customer expects HT quality for an MT price they will always be disappointed. The more you know about their needs the better you will be to meet them. Again, it sounds like Business 101, but our success is from giving the customer what THEY want, not what is convenient or easy for us to provide. To that end we bend over backwards to meet or exceed their requirement for quality and delivery time, but NOT to the point where we blur the line between service levels.

2.4 The Tools

More tool providers are entering the MT space every year, so I will avoid mentioning specific tools. Suffice to say you will need to constantly evaluate the tools available and be willing to switch if something better comes along. Some tool vendors are incredibly difficult to deal with so that may influence your choice and the tool should fit the task you are going to perform.

Some are far better at batch translations so if you are going for the large volume market, you'll want to pay particular attention to the platform and sizing to handle the throughput. For the on-demand type service, ease-of-use and quality may be more of a focus. There is also less involved with training a system for the on-demand use, since the inputs are widely varied and customizing or optimizing for specific domains gains very little, unlike doing bulk volume for a specific industry or company.

Specialization is also occuring for document types, especially patents. Optimized software exists in almost all major languages of countries doing significant Intellectual Property activity (China, Japan, Korea, and European countries). For any tool vendors, making it easier to "train" the software would be a good focus or automate the

learning process so less effort is required to see improvement over time in the output quality.

2.5 Post-editing

There exists a gut-level reaction to post-editing MT files by professional translators that borders on irrational. An outright refusal to post-edit MT files will only result in more business for those offering MT post-editing services.

The best way to view MT post-editing is as an entirely new market opening up that is not competing with the existing HT market, but rather supplementing it.

In light of a supplementing HT approach to MT, the post-edit activity requires someone satisfied with something less than perfection in the on-demand market. The customer is paying for fast and cheap, not good. You can give them good, but then what do you sell your HT services for? When you offer multiple levels of service you should take great care not to blur the lines too much between those levels.

2.6 Service

For all the role technology plays in the MT sector, the thing that will keep customers coming back is still service.

Given the option of blind interaction with Google Translate, or ordering a service from an interactive organization, most customers will opt for the friendly, human touch every time. Suppose you run your document through Google Translate and the quality is insufficient for your needs, what are your options?

Contrast that scenario with going to a vendor that offers multiple levels of service and a clear path for quality improvement. Back to Business 101, you are providing value, not just the means to an end.

2.7 Phone Service

We like to compare our service with the phone or power provider. When you pick up the phone you expect a dial tone, or when you flip the switch you expect the lights to come on and the vast majority of the time things work. MT services are viewed by the customer the same way. Our typical turnaround time for an MT quote, from the initial requeste to quote approval runs less than 10 minutes and has been as low as 2 minutes, day-in, day-out.

Once customers become accustomed to that type of service you reset the bar on expectations. Your ability to reliably deliver consistent quality is key for developing customer trust. MT is no different from HT in this regard. Viewing MT customers as somehow less demanding because they want it bad, now… would be a mistake.

3 Summary

You can make money by offering MT and there are many market segments largely unserved and wide open. We have yet to explore all the ways we can use the tools available to us and combine them with other emerging technologies to be major players in the MT space. For the on-demand MT service, think in terms of smaller projects, lower margins but higher volumes. In the bulk segment you will see higher volumes, larger projects and possibly lower margins but that depends on your negotiating skills and efficiency.

If you have not offered any type of MT or MAT service before, you should set up a trial process and experiment to come up with a workflow and process that fits your anticipated customer base. Have a good idea of how long each step in the process will take and what the limits of your staff are before offering it to paying customers. Do NOT overpromise.

Doing MT right will open doors for other services since it offers a low-risk starting point to establish your company as a new vendor. The level of service you provide and value you bring to the customer is what will determine your success. Properly set expectations and deliver consistent results and you will succeed!