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           THE MT ERRORS WHICH CAUSE MOST TROUBLE TO POSTEDITORS

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Errors can be categorized according to the amount of trouble caused.
Simple errors can be classified objectively but complex errors involve
more subjective judgments. This raises more general questions, i.e.
standards of accuracy, intelligibility and style, the economics of MT
and the involvement of the posteditor in improving the MT system. MT
is most successful with repetitive texts.

INTRODUCTION

All errors cause trouble. This much we can say even before we begin to define
our terms. A glance at any postedited text reveals that a fair amount of red
ink has had to flow to bring the text up to accepted standards of human
translation.

In the context of postediting an error may be defined as 'any feature of the
translation which causes the posteditor to put pen to paper'. Such a
definition covers a multitude of sins, of both commission and omission.

Various attempts have been made to classify and quantify errors in MT texts
and this process must form the basis of any useful examination of errors. For
the purposes of this presentation I propose three categories, based on the
amount of trouble which the error causes to the posteditor.

CATEGORY I - MINOR ERRORS

This category includes the misuse or omission of the definite article, wrong
preposition, wrong personal pronoun, or the wrong choice of translation -
usually of a noun - when alternatives are possible (dossier = file/backrest).
These are blatant errors, easy to identify and easy to postedit, particularly
since only one or two words have to be deleted or supplied. These errors do
not cause much trouble.

CATEGORY II - MAJOR ERRORS

This covers more substantial and complex errors. Examples are

- a word-for-word translation of idiomatic expressions. A sentence beginning
 "L'année 1980 a vu se dérouler..." tends to fare rather badly.

- errors which arise when the computer identifies a part of speech incorrectly.
 'Entre' translated as 'between' instead of 'enters', 'nous avions' as 'we
 aeroplanes'.
 These errors often manage to contaminate the rest of the sentence, with
 disastrous results.

- the inability to change active verbs into the English passive can also lead
 to chaos.

However, these are just more complex versions of Category I errors. Again it
is patently obvious that something has gone wrong, and there is no problem in

identifying the words which have to be deleted and replaced. Often the
quickest remedy is to correct the whole clause or sentence and write in one's
own translation from scratch. In other words, the same technique as for
Category I errors, but on a larger scale - delete and replace with correct
translation.

CATEGORY III - GREY AREAS

This category includes what might be termed 'doubtful translations and near
misses'. On better days, or when feedback has had the desired impact, the
computer sometimes provides reasonably intelligible phrases, clauses and even
whole sentences. Paradoxically, this is precisely what causes most trouble.
This is chiefly because at this stage the decisions which the posteditor must
make become more subjective than for the first two categories. First of all he
must make a yes/no decision, i.e. whether or not to alter the text. Then he
must decide how far to go with his improvements. Should he 'patch up',
salvaging as much as possible, should he cross it all out and substitute his
own elegant translation, or should he choose one of several possible middle
courses? Even if the translation had been produced by a human translator these
decisions would be subjective. When MT is involved a further factor comes into
play to affect one's judgment.

This factor is the posteditor's general attitude towards MT. A posteditor who
is generally sympathetic towards MT will tend to make a minimum of
alterations. He wants MT to be successful, and so he may be led to accept a
lower standard of translation, particularly when any alterations concern style
rather than accuracy.

On the other hand a posteditor who is generally unsympathetic towards MT will
tend to find his worst suspicions confirmed at every turn, and will end up by
condemning all MT out of hand and rewriting whole pages from scratch.

ACCEPTABILITY OF MT

This brings us to the question of what is acceptable. Three major criteria for
assessing MT, or indeed any translation, are accuracy, intelligibility and
style. The ideal is a high standard on all three counts, and my presentation
is largely based on the assumption that this is the ideal we are aiming at.
However, we are forced to admit that in the real world the priorities may be
rather different.

In any situation, accuracy should be the most important consideration. This is
precisely where the computer should excel. Indeed, if it were the only
criterion, the task of the posteditor would be reduced to that of correcting
the blatant errors such as wrong alternative translations of nouns or wrong
identification of part of speech. Intelligibility is not such a strong point
of MT, but for end-users who are familiar with the subject matter complete
intelligibility may not be essential.

This leaves us with style. Style is highly prized in translating circles. It
is not appreciated nearly so much in technical and commercial circles where
the priorities tend to be speed and reasonable accuracy in many cases, rather
than elegance and perfection.

Many customers for translations will happily accept stylistic horrors if this
cuts down the time they have to wait for a translation. Under these
circumstances a good deal of time and money can be saved on 'stylistic

postediting', and the most troublesome errors - i.e. of style - can simply be disregarded.

However, not all posteditors are prepared to sell their souls by letting through translations which they consider to be unsatisfactory. This is a very important psychological aspect of postediting, which I now propose to consider.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

I have suggested one possible basis for classifying errors according to the amount of trouble caused to the posteditor. Trouble in this context may be defined as the amount of physical and mental effort required to correct errors. Although the aim was to assess this objectively, we saw that subjective judgments creep in. On top of this we must also consider the purely subjective question of the posteditor's emotional reaction to errors, which concerns a different but no less valid definition of 'trouble'. There is a 'coefficient of annoyance'. This cannot be quantified in accordance with any formula, as it varies from one individual to another, but one can criticize certain features of MT which will cause annoyance, in varying degrees, to most posteditors:

The computer does not contain everyday words and expressions.
It produces the wrong alternative translation.
It does not produce different alternative translations as required.
It does not change active infinitives in French into passive infinitives in English.
It does not change nouns into verbs, or at least gerunds, in English.
It translates idioms and idiomatic phrases word for word.

The annoyance caused by the individual failings is compounded by the realization that all these errors will be made each time the particular case occurs in the original. At the beginning of a long document this is a depressing thought. A further compounding factor is the apparent intractability of these problems at the present stage of MT development.

MINIMIZING EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

This is a psychological problem and must be treated by psychological methods. The answer lies in the value of feedback. The posteditor must see his work not merely as the unending task of correcting one-off errors. It is an investment of time and trouble which will pay dividends in the future. This future must not lie too far ahead. It is important for the posteditor to see the results of his work fairly quickly.

To achieve this the posteditor should ideally confine his efforts to texts which are repetitive in themselves and/or similar to each other in terms of subject matter and terminology. A representative batch of pages should be translated and postedited. Recurring errors should be identified, corrected where possible and fed into the computer before further translation work is done. The impact of this feedback will be apparent in the next batch of MT.

This produces two psychological benefits. The posteditor will be gratified to see the results of his work in the text, and will be motivated to do another stint of postediting plus feedback. The uplift of seeing the computer get something right every time certainly outweighs the depression felt earlier when the computer was getting it wrong every time.

Posteditors are people, not machines, and it is vital to minimize the amount

of 'subjective' trouble caused by MT errors, so that the posteditor will more
readily accept the amount of 'objective' trouble inherent in his task.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I should like to make a plea for a rational attitude towards
MT. Posteditors are people, but computers are not. To regard computers as
animate beings which make mistakes, display ignorance of elementary facts, and
throw a fit when faced with complex sentences, is unscientific and emotional.
MT is a tool, or at best a set of mechanized tools. The human translator must
realize that he is in charge. He must use MT, accept its present limitations,
involve himself in it and thereby contribute to improving it.

This is how to deal with the trouble caused by MT errors.