

Letter to the Editor

April 5, 1993

To the Editor

ATA Chronicle

This is in response to the letter from Alex Gross in the March *Chronicle* on the subject of machine translation—not a “play within a play,” but a letter within a letter. In his letter to the *Chronicle*, Alex reprints the letter he sent to *Byte*. My answer, provided to *Byte* last January, was as follows:

“Unfortunately, space limitations and *Byte*’s priorities prevented me from examining these professional issues, on which I have published extensive data elsewhere (e.g. “Long-Term Data for an MT Policy,” *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1989). Speaking from my own experience in the trenches—30 years as a translator and 12 years and several millions of words as a posteditor of machine translation—I can say that on average MT doubles my production. Also, I find MT *less tiring* than translating from scratch.

“The computer’s output is far from perfect, but that doesn’t matter. What counts is *how easily* I can bring the text up to a standard that is acceptable to the translation consumer. Running text that is well-written in the first place goes the fastest; tables, footnotes, and badly written originals are the slowest.

“As a supervisor of more than 50 post-editors over a 12-year period, I found that a number of translators were able to use MT successfully. Many, however, could not adapt. Even in the successful cases, there is a learning curve that only levels off after two to three months of full-time practice. It’s unrealistic for a translator to talk about MT before really walking in the Indian’s moccasins.”

I did not attempt to answer Alex’s questions about percentages of texts because the denominator is missing: no one has come even close to estimating the volume of translation being done in the world. Major flaws have been found in every known study of the translation market. It would have been irresponsible to hazard a guess, and I question the basis for Gross’s estimates of 1%.

In regard to the one-sided structure of the ATA Committee on Machine Translation which allegedly “has been allowed to develop,” I would like to point out that the Committee is nicely balanced and that, far from being one-sided, it is actually *more* diverse than when I inherited it from Astrid Johanson in 1986. The breakdown is as follows:

<i>CAT/MT Committee</i>	<i>MT Committee</i>
1986	1993
2 vendors	2 vendors
3 translators	4 translators
1 academic	2 MT consultants
	1 terminologist

Under my chairmanship the Committee has greatly increased the number of presentations by translators at the annual ATA conferences. We have emphasized panels organized around specific themes. Vendors have appeared where their contributions were appropriate, as for example in the annual session on "New Developments." It is of interest to compare the program for 1986 with the one for 1992:

<i>Annual Conference</i>	<i>Annual Conference</i>
1986	1992
4 vendors	0 vendors
2 translators	4 translators
2 academics	2 other MT users
	1 MT consultant

The work of the Committee on Machine Translation has not deviated from the objectives of the CAT/MT Committee which were adopted under Astrid's chairmanship in 1986.

Sincerely,

Muriel Vasconcellos, Chair

ATA Committee on Machine Translation