

Letter to the Editor

I am writing to comment on Sally Costello's clever and well-phrased missive from the trenches (January 1990) taking issue with my "scholarly" presentation of the case for machine translation (October 1990).

First of all, lest anyone get the impression I am not familiar with the inside of a trench, I'd like to say that I have been translating for picky customers on a daily basis for nearly 28 years. Thirteen years ago I opposed the introduction of MT as a production tool at the Pan American Health Organization where I work, but when PAHO's home-grown "Spanam" software on the mainframe computer was linked to our regular Wang word processing, I finally agreed to give it a fair try. The upshot is that in the last 11 years I have postedited between 2 and 3 million words of machine translation (more than 10,000 pages), always working on-screen. On good days I have postedited 10,000 or 11,000 words (over 40 double-spaced pages) to the level of finished, deliverable product. This in addition to supervising and reviewing a team of professional translators not all of whom use MT. So I am well acquainted with the day-to-day working environment.

In Sally's case, with due respect for her willingness to try MT, the exercise was conducted under totally unrealistic conditions. She tells us that she personally keyed in 22 pages of input text, reviewed the output by hand, and then entered her corrections on the word processor—not her "favorite job." That she was able to do all this, much of it grudgingly, "in about the same time it would have taken to translate

the same 22 pages without the software" is in fact a tribute to the technology. Because in the world of real applications, MT is seldom justified if the input text has to be keyed in manually. For the translator to do this herself is to waste a valuable human resource. Then, adding to this burden, when it came time to postedit, Sally went so far as to do her work twice, once in longhand and again in word processing. It is generally agreed that the advantages of MT are not being maximized if the translator postedit on hard copy instead of directly on the screen. I have calculated that it takes two to three times longer to postedit in longhand, not counting the time to enter the changes. In our translation service we have developed macros on the word processor to speed up many of the frequent editing operations, and these are coupled with search-and-replace functions that take care of recurring problems specific to the text. The editing macros and other strategies are described in my articles in *Computers and Translation* (1,1:21-38, 1986) and *Tools for the Trade* (London, Aslib, 1987). On the subject in general of implementing MT, I would also recommend Part III of our ATA Series volume 2, *Technology as Translation Strategy*.

Finally, both Sally and the machine were at the beginning of their learning curve. While she has not told us which MT system was used or its track record with the subject matter at hand, it is safe to say that all systems, even the venerable mainframe giants, need to be tailored to the particular application. It is also true that the translator needs practice in order to become adept at introducing the kinds of changes that are most effective in postediting. Both these processes take time—months. The experience of a single job, even performed under the best of conditions, cannot be considered predictive of future results.

In conclusion, I certainly do not advocate chaining Sally or any other translator to a machine, especially if it is not their favorite thing. As I said in the *Chronicle* last October, MT is not for everyone. But I also said that translators will only have a tool they can really use once they get involved in MT.

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