Using PROMT Translation Programs for Academic Work

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Modern academic work is international

Much of the current academic work is carried out more and more on an international level, with a few world languages playing a major role for it. Academics around the globe are pushed to publishing in those languages. Among those, English has taken the most prominent position. Although this has been the global trend since World War II, it is now accelerated in the Internet era. It becomes more and more apparent that any periodical that does not produce, in addition to its printed version, an Internet-accessible digital version, simply becomes irrelevant for the scientific community. This has made publishing in English a matter of academic survival in many fields. It has subsequently become a pre-condition for getting a job and promotion in academic institutions. However, due to insufficient knowledge of the language many academics must rely on translators and editors to get their work converted to English. Naturally, people who must carry out their work in more than one language and prepare materials for oral presentation, teaching, and publishing, often find themselves having to invest a lot of time (and money) in translations and back-translations of their own work.

Translation software and academic work

The question is to what extent translation programs can be helpful in alleviating at least some of the burden of preparing texts. My answer is that they definitely can, but the problem is that the products generated by them can never be used without often extensive editing. This means that there must be a human being at the end of the production line to do the final job. If their knowledge of the target language is not sufficient, they will have to be helped by other professionals. When this is the case, using translation software does not really accelerate matters.

On the other hand, people with a reasonable knowledge of the target language, and who are able to finalize the translated text, can benefit a lot from the use of translation software. It is not easy to calculate precisely the amount of work saved by the use of such software. I would however venture to make an estimate based exclusively on my own personal experience, where, I believe that the time and energy saved are between 30% and 80%, depending on the program and various other factors. When one ventures such calculations, it should be borne in mind that in addition to measurable data, such as the actual time and money saved,

one should also take into account the psychological aspect. This means that although in principle a human being working very diligently could produce the same amount of sentences manually within more or less the same span of time, many people who are not professional translators − and most academics have little or no translation experience or knowledge − are often unable to carry out the job because they are often psychologically deterred. My contention is that since translation software can deliver a manageable text, much of the drudgery involved with translation (typing, dictionary search) is simply eliminated for the human editor of the text.

My background in the field of translation

Although I have never been a full fledged professional translator, at various periods of my life I carried out literary, technical, and academic translation from the following languages into Hebrew: English, French, Arabic, Esperanto, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic, Russian, and Italian. In addition, I was extensively involved for about 15 years with revising translations as editor of an academic journal. Moreover, in my academic career I have studied the phenomenon of translation and the dynamic networks of relations that take place in the import and export of semiotic goods via translation. I have thus accumulated both practical and theoretical experience in the field of translation. Recently, however, the major part of my practical engagements with translation has been translating and back-translating my own work, mostly between English and Spanish. While no translation software is available for Hebrew and therefore cannot possibly help with the preparation of texts translated into or from that language, both English and Spanish are very well served by a number of translation programs that I have been able to check and use over the years.

My current use of translation

Most of my need for translation is thus currently related to my own work. In this sense, I believe I represent quite a large group of academics and other writing professionals who are in needs of producing texts in at least two languages. While in the case of Hebrew I still must carry out all translations manually, I have been generating most of my English −> Spanish texts with the help of translation programs. I began to use such programs in 1994, when I bought my first Globalink translation program for DOS. The program was later converted to the Windows platform, purchased and upgraded by the L&H Company, and then dumped when the latter went bankruptcy. I then had to look for new software, and having tested Systran Professional Standard, Word Magic, and PROMT Professional, I have switched to doing most of my work with the latter, except for an occasional use of Systran, mostly for the languages that are not served by PROMT.

PROMT in comparison with the other translation programs: A general overview

PROMT can translate to and from the following languages: English, Spanish, French, Russian, German, and Portuguese. Although Italian appears on the logo of the program, it is not one of its languages. It works under Windows and there are versions for English-Spanish and English-Russian for Pocket PC (upgraded to work under Windows Mobile 5 in August 2006). It can be used as a standalone program as well as work from within Microsoft Word. It has a very rich user interface – some would say too rich – and many extra functions and services that can be used by advanced and professional users. Personally, I have found the user interface very useful and easily manageable. The philosophy, so to speak, behind the design is to make everything explicit in order to eliminate ambiguity as much as possible. This is not a universal trait of all applications, and thus cannot be taken for granted, which is why I find PROMT laudable on this. It would have been nice to be able to customize which features appear on the bar, but this is definitely preferable in my mind to the elimination of features carried out by certain applications under the assumption that many features would confuse the users. I believe in offering more options even though most users don't ever use all the features in full. Among the most excellent features of PROMT I would like to highlight the various formats for saving the results of translation. One of those is the ability to save the original together with the translation as a table in RTF format, which I find extremely practical. In the domains of marketing and customer service, both PROMT and Word Magic, in contradistinction to Systran, can be downloaded for trial before purchase. I think they should be commended for that, because this is the only way that a user can find out whether a program is suitable for them. All of the three applications sell most of their products as downloadable files, which is the only cost effective and economical way for a modern user.

On the whole, Systran and Word Magic are also designed in a similar way to PROMT, but I find Systran to be less well designed in a way that I would call less open to various options. This is typical of applications whose designers get the information from limited sources and therefore think that there is only one normative way for doing things. Among other details, there is more guesswork to be done with the various functions, and there is no way to save the files with both original and translation in a format that is not endogenous to the program. On the other hand, Systran Professional Standard serves more languages than PROMT, and also sells as a multilingual package rather than by the language. The languages served by the Systran European package are: English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Russian, Portuguese and Swedish. The installation of the package is much more straightforward and involves far less complications than the installation of PROMT.

In addition, Systran offers the same package (without Swedish and Russian) for Pocket PC. In contrast,, when you install additional languages with PROMT, you may run into difficulties with activation, which is otherwise the only major complication that I believe should be addressed by the manufacturer, because I'm pretty convinced that it costs more to support bewildered users than invest in making a simpler multilingual design. As for Word Magic, it is currently an application for English and Spanish only, so it has not yet developed into a full scale multilanguage translation tool that can be compared with the two other programs.

PROMT in comparison with the other translation programs: Performance comparison

The most important function of a translation application is obviously its ability to translate as accurately and efficiently as possible. No well developed other features, such as an excellent user interface, or various auxiliary tools, which definitely have their own merits, can compensate for an inferior quality of translation. My comparison between PROMT and the other translation applications definitely puts it ahead of all the others. Although it is very difficult to make a valid assessment because various people tend to attach different values to different factors, I believe that it would be correct to say that the texts produced by PROMT are between 60% and 80% successful in terms of usability. The discrepancy between 60% and 80% is related to the type of text and the language direction used. Some texts are naturally more complicated than others, and I believe there is also inequality between the accomplishments of the various language modules produced by PROMT, as well as varying degrees of success between the various directions. In my experience, translations from English into the other languages have normally been more successful than the other way around. I have tested and worked with English, Spanish, and French, as well as with some German and Russian. In all my texts, translations into English from these languages have been below 60% accuracy, while the results in the opposite direction have been more manageable texts. However, I have read and heard different assessments, which leaves this aspect in a way unresolved. In my own personal experience, texts I translated from French and Spanish into English contained too many sentences that were not comprehensible and thus useless for a reader who is not familiar with the original languages. On the other hand, the direction from German into English has turned out to be more successful, but the opposite direction has rendered far better results. Since most of my work has been creating texts in Spanish, and to some extent in French, translated from the original English texts, the deficiencies of PROMT have not affected me as they possibly would someone who needs to work in the opposite direction.

Inexperienced users may be frightened by what seems to be a low level of success, namely when it is around 60%. In fact, this is quite a high level of success in view of the fact that manual translation, even when carried out by experienced professionals, may often require revisions. Anyone who has been in the business of editing translations done by others knows very well that sometimes more than 50% of the target text must be thoroughly re-written. Often, such revisions come pretty close to alternative translations altogether. Many translation consumers do not bother to make any revisions not because they are not necessary but because they are too expensive. You can thus find many translation mistakes in the electronic and the printed media, and actually in official documents. 60% to 80% as a raw product to be revised and improved are therefore quite a high level of success.

I would like to reiterate my measures for assessment of success. One is the amount of time, money and energy actually saved by the program. If a piece of text is translated within twenty minutes or less and then revised in the course of two days work, this can compare with the two weeks alternative. In such cases, the savings is quite prominent. Moreover, when one is revising the text that one has written, more attention can be given to the text instead of concentrating on translating procedures. The other measure is not as visible as the first one and cannot be calculated in clear terms at all, but in my experience it is nevertheless of tremendous importance. I am referring to the factor of stress that is quite often present when nonprofessionals have to carry out such tasks. This kind of stress simply deters people from approaching the task. The translation applications help relieve the burden by quickly producing a text that can be post-edited. Although this factor is hardly ever taken into account in the majority of reviews of translation and other software, I would give it a high priority when it comes to evaluating what software can do.

Shortcomings

I believe that the shortcomings of PROMT go back to two different kinds of causes. On the one hand, there are differences between certain languages that make the communication between them more difficult. This applies not only to translation software but to human translation as well. For example, on the levels of grammar and phraseology there is a larger discrepancy between French and English than between French and Spanish. Basic problems like the definite article between the various languages may still remain unresolved. On the other hand, it takes quite a lot of investment to extensively database all of the possible verbal combinations. PROMT still fails, quite often, with idioms and collocations that are often translated in the wrong order and with an attempt to render them literally rather than with ready-made equivalent combinations.

However, in the majority of cases PROMT reaches better results than its competitors. Quite often, PROMT is even better on the level of vocabulary, whereas Systran quite frequently does not provide any translation at all but simply puts the original word into the translated text. This occurs not only when the target language is Russian or Swedish (which is generally quite grotesque and actually should be dropped from the package), but also between the major languages served by this application.

Conclusions

Translation programs leave much to be desired, yet they have reached a level that makes them helpful working tools both for professional translators and other people in the writing professions who either often or sporadically need translated texts. They must be used with at least some awareness to their limitations, which means in practical terms that one must be prepared to carry out quite a lot of revisions on the output. In spite of that, time and energy saving, which also includes alleviating psychological stress, is remarkable. On the basis of several years of work and repeated tests I have come to the conclusion that PROMT is currently the best translation product on the market. However, those who can afford it would often benefit from producing translations with more than one program. It is always likely that from time to time even a less successful program can still suggest better solutions for particular sentences, which can then be trans-planted into the more successful text.

Postscript: A comment about post-editing

Sometimes a sentence can be fixed by replacing one word of by changing the tense of a verb, adding a preposition, and the like. At other times, however, a sentence must be completely re-written, even though many of its elements can be still put into use again. To implement such revisions by typing may be at times quite demanding. The fastest way sometime is to write the sentence entirely from scratch. However, there is a much better method, which also allows to easily combine translations from various sources (such as from various translation programs), and that is speech recognition. Revising a text by dictation with the help of a speech recognition program is much more practical than doing it by typing. Unlike translation software, the current speech recognition programs can render between 98% and 99% accuracy. If you look at a translated sentence and you know immediately what's wrong in it and how it can be replaced, it takes no time at all to dictate the correct sentence and get it written down without much hassle. Therefore, the combination of translation software with speech recognition can be the ultimate solution for generating this type of texts with the minimum effort and the maximum efficiency. For more information of speech recognition programs, see my speech Website: http://speech.even-zohar.com.

[This text was dictated with Microsoft Speech 2003 and Buddy DesktopMic USB microphone]

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