

Prompting a New Way To Translate

Is a machine a viable way to translate some books?

by Craig Morgan Teicher -- *Publishers Weekly*, 4/20/2009

While technology continues to become more intertwined with all aspects of the book business, at least no one is proposing that the Internet do our publishing—the selection and editing of books still needs people to do it, even if the Internet has ushered in new tools, like Twitter, that are becoming as essential to the promotion of a book as old-fashioned galleys. But there are companies proposing that publishers use some Internet-based software to assist book folks in doing things—such as translating text from another language—that perhaps we never thought we'd hand over to anyone but skilled professionals.

ProMT is a Russian company with an American arm headed by Olga Beregovaya. The company makes machine translation software that can be used on the Internet, put on a PC and custom tailored for large corporate clients. The company does things like translate major newspapers passed online between European countries. It also handles translation of in-house documents for big corporations, such as Adobe and Cisco, whose customer support Web site is powered by **ProMT**. The company also powers closed-captioning for TV and news broadcasts in Spanish in America. And **ProMT** even works with NASA. According to Beregovaya, using new algorithms, the translations produced by **ProMT** are surprisingly accurate: “We can capture things we could not capture before, subtleties. We can get a verb wrong, sometimes, but it's improving. The text reads and flows much better.”

But what's this got to do with publishing? Beregovaya isn't suggesting we use her software to generate cheap versions of Tolstoy with occasional wrong verbs. She does think it might be possible to use it to make a draft of such a book, although “someone should fine-tune it before publishing,” she says. The market she's really going after is textbooks and instruction manuals, books in which no one's looking too closely at the prose. According to Beregovaya, “the more rigid the language is, the easier it is to translate. If we talk about smaller genres like news, or instruction books, textbooks, recipe books, how-to books, if the user's objective is to understand what to do, then machine translation would be fine.”

Some might disagree, but at least in terms of translation costs, the numbers are good: “Humans can translate 1,500 words per day; with the help of a machine, a person can do at least two times more, as many as 8,000 words,” Beregovaya said. Combine this kind of software with POD printing, and you've got a cheap and easy way of bringing reference books into any language.

ProMT hasn't announced any deals with American publishers yet. For now, it's just trying to get the word out about what it does. Beregovaya anticipates the company will be working with companies in the publishing industry within two or three months.

As for the literary uses of this technology, it turns out poets occasionally use this kind of software, translating their compositions into, say, Greek, then back into English using the same program. Due to the machine translation software's odd impressions of exactly how languages work, poets often get a fresh perspective on their lines through this exercise, transforming the software's mistakes into greater originality. But, as Beregovaya said, **ProMT** is no way to translate a book of literary fiction, or even to create a draft of a book that a translator could then refine, a limitation that Roberto Bolaño translator Natasha Wimmer agreed with. “Based on the machine translations I've seen, using a machine-generated draft would mean more rather than less work for me,” Wimmer said. “It's not just that machine translations are rough—they're often misleading. And then I'd also have to rewrite for consistency of rhythm and style. I'm no Luddite, but it's hard to see how machines will help much in literary translation, at least in the near future.”

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