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Greetings!

To Use or Not to Use: Machine Translation

Machine Translation (MT) has many advantages when used in combination with a professional “human” translator. However, disadvantages come into play when it is used alone. MT becomes almost useless without the support of an expert translator to build on its framework and adjust it for meaning and format. MT can be an ideal foundation for a project that is lengthy and needs an expedited time frame, not to mention a moderate cost. Ideally, a professional translator will be able to provide a “new” word count at one cost and a “repeated” word count at a significantly lower cost. Also, the time frame can be cut by as much as third when a significantly large document is translated with the assistance of MT.

What is Machine Translation exactly? It is computer software that has been programmed to substitute words in one language for words in another language with the equivalent meaning. Its success lies in phrase recognition, translation of idioms, and the isolation of anomalies. In other words, if a document uses the same phrase over and over, the machine translation program will remember that phrase and simply pop it in place as it reappears in the source document. Over time, the program will become familiar with an organization’s terminology and standardized phrasing, and remember these pieces of translation for future documents.

Prior to implementing machine translation, a professional translator may use the MT program to create a glossary of terms, look up words that are in question, and look for patterns in the text of the document. After the initial MT run-through, the translator will begin the review and look at the bones of the translation and adjust the wording to meet the target meaning and tone. This systematically adjusts the memory of the machine translation and is specific for each client.

Even the seasoned professional has been known to use Google Translate, one of the more popular mainstream MT resources, to double-check a word choice in the target language. On the other hand, “user beware” when using MT as the main resource to communicate a message to a potential non-English-speaking buyer, as words can be completely out of context, from a different industry and without fluency. The message can also be curt and without familiarity or courtesy.

As an experiment, I suggest trying Google Translate to communicate to a bilingual friend on Facebook. Send a disclaimer beforehand to avoid being “de-friended.” Sadly, global business associates may not be as forgiving. If confidentiality requires you to use MT to send a message, choose several different MT programs and execute a reverse translation to verify that the meaning has the content and tone of your original message.

A translated document needs to reflect the author’s message in the best way possible, whether it is within a manufacturer’s instruction manual or a marketing campaign. When machine translation is put into play, it can be used as a tool to improve the turnaround time and create consistency within a document, but a professional translator must take the lead for a translation project to be accurate and meaningful.

