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**The State of the Industry:
Linguists Speak**



Admerix Survey

The State of the Industry: Linguists Speak

"We felt that with so many companies stumbling over themselves to use MT to reduce costs, we had not heard from the linguists whose livelihood is threatened by the innovation..."

The industry dream is this: machine translation followed by very cheap post-editing by crowds of volunteer linguists on online systems. Eliminate professional per word linguists as well as project managers.

With such a wide range of language service companies considering using machine translation (MT) in their work flows or running pilot MT projects, we thought it was an appropriate time to find out what our professional linguists thought about this trend.

We sent questions to our most active linguists and a number of others who we had not worked with before but were on our "hot list" to work with in the future. These were all full-time, qualified language professionals with at least 5 years of translation experience.

Given that linguists are intensely focused people, we were not sure of the response we would receive. While some responses were "when will you send me a new job," overall it was amazing the time people spent writing in and the very lengthy comments many made. Of these we had an over 60% reply rate—an amazing 363 responses.

Rather than the usual "go to the survey site and click the most appropriate response," we emailed some questions with a personal introduction and invited linguists to simply email back responses in their own words. We felt this method was the most friendly and personal and would invite open ended responses that provided insight into opinions held and the intensity of those opinions.

Our linguists consist mainly of subject specialists in these languages: Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Thai, Khmer, Burmese, Lao, Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Dari, Hebrew, Hindi, Punjabi, Kannada, Malayalam, Bengali, Armenian, Turkish, Russian, Ukrainian, as well as a selection of major Euro languages we regularly work with such as German, French, and Portuguese.

1. How do you feel about the machine translation (MT) trend?

We felt that with so many companies stumbling over themselves to use MT to reduce costs, we had not heard from the linguists whose livelihood is threatened by the innovation.

In the past we had often heard the loudest linguist voices decrying MT, so we were quite surprised to find a wide range of opinions on the MT trend. They broadly followed three viewpoints. Derision and denial, acceptance, "but it will never go far," and expectation that it will cause linguists to soon be playing a very different role in the industry.

Overall, 45% responded that MT should be rejected entirely. 30% were okay with it but expect MT will never replace translators. 25% were ready to embrace MT and work with it when it is developed more fully.

A sampling of representative responses

The MT wave is going to be short-lived! I am surprised at even the thought of initiating the same.

I think that machines cannot replace our brains, but unfortunately we cannot avoid machine translation because it makes clients believe they are saving money I think it will soon die out, as more and more people will begin to realise that there is nothing capable of replacing a qualified translator.

MT will be a strong tool for translation in a certain field such as manual documents and technology related documents. No one can stop this trend. It costs less and produce

**Very few linguists
have any real
experience
working with online
translation systems,
in spite of what
developers of such
systems may say.**

translation in a faster and more appropriate way. "Human" translator will ultimately be excluded from these fields, although it will take a decade or a few decades. MT is very useful in this type of translation because the expressions used in these fields have a certain pattern. Frankly speaking, that's why I am not interested in these fields.

I think it will be used by ordinary people to grasp the general meaning of something, but it will not affect professional translations (no company would dare to publish its press release on a successful merger based on this).

It's pretty interesting technology. I've seen MT results of European languages that were maybe 90%+ accurate. Of course, anything creative/witty/nuanced will always either require a human or (in the distant future, if ever) really strong AI. The results I have seen for Japanese to English (my niche) thus far have been unusable, though some short phrases are impressive. MT tends to "choke" on Japanese syntax, and especially its elliptical nature. I think for JE MT to be any good, the source text would have to be specifically written for MT: very short sentences, everything explicitly stated instead of implied, no nuance or wit or creativity or flair. In other words, very bizarre Japanese.

That's with the current technology, of course. If better AI or something came along it would be a lot more impressive, but don't hold your breath. By the way, be aware that many translators have very negative attitudes toward MT not because they actually believe it's not any good, but because they are afraid it will render them unemployable.

I think they go too far. It's not completely useless, especially for translation between similar/related languages. Having said that, I wouldn't use it for a professional document, at least not as it is now.

Inevitable. Human translators will have to keep up with the technology and provide added value.

It is a trend guiding the translation world. It is a milestone in the translation history.

With the advance of technology, machine translation is unavoidable. It is bound to develop. However, language is not merely an arrangement of words. Language has psychology, has art, has emotion. I don't think machine can understand those things.

2. What is your attitude about being asked to edit machine translated (MT) documents?

With just a few exceptions, linguists were very skeptical about the viability of MT at this time. This was regardless of their overall feelings about MT in general. The most common response was that editing MT at this point was no different than doing a translation from scratch.

A surprising number of respondents (one quarter of all responses) complained that multi-language vendors (MLVs) send out editing tasks they claimed had been translated by actual linguists, but which could instantly be identified as having been machine translated.

Overall, 65% would not edit machine translation (as it takes longer than retranslating), 30% might accept the work, but only after viewing the MT results first, and 5% were not sure but would wait and see.

A sampling of representative responses

I am tired of being given editing jobs by clients who lie and say it was translated by a professional linguist. It is easy to see it is machine translated and completely unworkable!

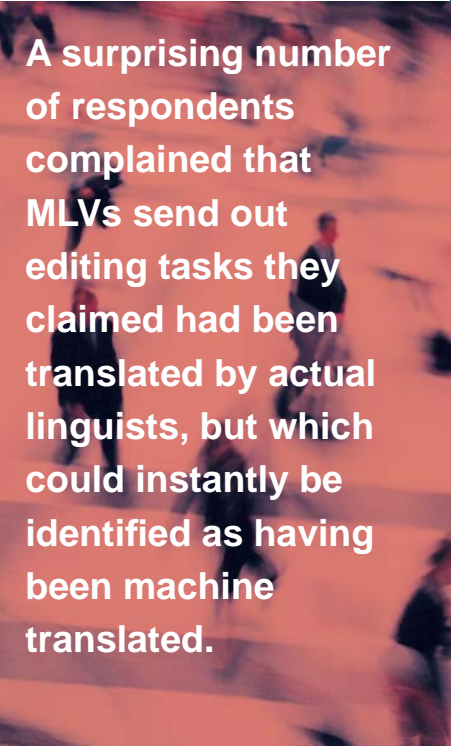
As soon as I am told it is an MT document, the first thought to cross my mind is, "That means I might as well start it from scratch."

If the field is my specialty, I am happy to do it. In the future, Excellent translators or editors will be required to work with MT. This means that translators with no specialty will not be required in the future.

No, I would never accept that job. The constant cross-checking with source documents would be a very tedious affair, and would probably take more time than just using a human to translate it to begin with.

It requires the same amount of time to translate the original document, so I want to be paid for the translation rate if I do.

We all hate it!



A surprising number of respondents complained that MLVs send out editing tasks they claimed had been translated by actual linguists, but which could instantly be identified as having been machine translated.

Japanese linguists, who can always be counted on for vigorous feedback and opinions, were particularly skeptical that their language could ever be translated by machine.

3. Do you think your language can be successfully machine translated?

Regardless of their opinions of MT overall, nearly everyone feels their language to be immune to machine translation—now and in the future. However, it was interesting to find the number of translators who volunteered that machine translation of English to Spanish was nearly perfect already.

Japanese linguists, who can always be counted on for vigorous feedback and opinions, were particularly skeptical that their language could ever be translated by machine.

Overall, the most common response to this question was a simple “no.”

A sampling of representative responses

No. Japanese is not suitable for MT.

Yes. It shall become possible in time. However, as you may have noticed, the quality of languages (I can speak only about English and Japanese) generated by freelance translators are getting worse and worse. The MT process using database created through “inferior” human translation processes would cause significant problems throughout the world. Even now, the leveraging of TMs comprised of inferior human translation data are dominant in the industry. I have not yet encountered “Client’s Approved Terms/Glossaries that are competent enough.

4. Of the following, what would be a more attractive arrangement for you with general translation work:

- A. Higher per word rates with long payment terms (60-90+ days)
- B. Lower per word rates with short payment term (less than 7 days)

Today, legions of overleveraged MLVs are having cash flow problems and thus are continually extending payment terms (for instance, 60 days and then payment at the end of that month).

In essence, companies are having their linguists finance their operations by delaying payments. A quick look at one of the many linguists boards that rate agencies will reveal the many, many companies who simply will not pay resources without legal threats.

The response we received to this question showed that very few linguists were willing to taking lower per word rates for faster payment. Many complained that localization companies were offering such faster payment or even on-time payment if linguists would take a discount.

From many of these responses, it was also clear that linguists overall have an unclear view of business concepts. Many interpreted very late payments and ever lengthening payment terms as companies attempting to “make more profit” as opposed to the reality that companies were attempting to manage their cash flow problems.

[Disclaimer: Admerix always pays on time and does not ask for any discounting. Our payment terms are 30 days, but for all of our preferred linguists, payment is immediate.]

5. Do you find that fast turnaround work is a problem?

With more and more clients and tier-one MLVs expecting near instant turnaround from linguists who are expected to be online, we wanted to know how linguists felt about this.

There were very few notable comments about this question except that “fast turnaround is not a problem.” It is possible that respondents interpreted the question as a test of their capabilities and thus wanted to make sure we knew they were available for fast turnaround work.

[Editorial aside from Admerix: Our experience from many years of language project management is that resources prefer not to work under pressure and rarely turn in quality work on rush timeframes. We have noted the complaint from linguists that “sure you want it immediately, but then three weeks later the end client will come back complaining about the quality.” This points out that most rush schedules are created merely for a project manager’s benefit (they want to get the job in before they go for a long weekend) or an end client who demands instant work, but then waits several weeks before doing anything with it. It is

likely with all the new online localization processes out there that the expectation of instant translation work will only grow.]

6. How do you feel about working in the online automated systems that are becoming so common in the localization industry? Does it make you work easier or more difficult?

Fewer people than we expected had any experience with online translation systems such as Across, memo-q or the proprietary systems of major MLVs.

Many linguists from Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia noted they cannot work on such systems consistently as net connections in their areas are generally slow and inconsistent.

A sampling of representative responses

So far, I have not experienced that.

As long as the system does not do translation, it is fine by me.

If in Indonesia, it is more difficult (the internet connection is bad).

7. Do you use a Translation Memory (CAT) tool now? If so, which one is your preference? Do you have any thoughts on Wordfast vs. Trados?

Trados is still leading the field by far, but the vitriol rages on against it for being overpriced and constantly needing to be upgraded to a new version. There was also much delight over the belief that cheaper competing systems would soon have SDL on the ropes. A surprising number of linguists either did not have TM tools or said that they preferred not to use them.

Others took the opportunity to extol tools they liked best, in particular Omega-T and WordFast, which continues to gain ground as a cheaper alternative to Trados. Other comments were that programs such as WordFast were much easier to use and more user friendly than Trados.

A sampling of representative responses

I only know about Trados and SDL Edit. Trados is not helpful. The most important thing for human translators in terms of translation speed is the time to find words appropriate in a given context.

Trados is overpriced junk and has too many features to learn.

Just from very slight experience, Trados is way too expensive for what it does, added to the fact that it takes ages to learn how to use it to its full capacity.

I am happy to know there are free systems that can replace Trados. It must get cheaper now.

In Vietnam I do not have a credit card for payment and cannot buy it.

Conclusion

The future is certain to bring surprises as machine translation technology grows by leaps and bounds. It is not yet clear just how close we are to a new model of creating corporate-grade translation through machine translation and online systems.

In general, linguists seem accepting of the MT trend while observing that MT editing is not practical at this time for their language. Few wished to post-edit MT documents and fewer than expected had experience with on-line translation process systems.

In the rush to cut costs by using machine translation, we feel that the opinions of translators—the backbone of the industry—should be heeded. Despite the risk of being marginalized by new innovations, we found our linguists had both positive and negative opinions on new innovations in the industry. Knowing how to retask linguists as the industry evolves will be key to both MLV success as well as tools providers targeting linguists.

“Trados is not helpful.”

“Trados is way too expensive.”

“I am happy to know of systems that can replace Trados.”

About Admerix



Admerix is a full-service localization solutions company headquartered in stable and transparent Singapore. Founded in 2005, Admerix is led by localization veterans with over 25 years of localization industry experience.

The Admerix team provides customized localization solutions for localization taking advantage of industry-best practices. By focusing their experience on your project, Admerix native-English speaking American, British, and Australian project managers create confidence as they complete complex, multi-language localization projects on time and within budget.

Headquartered in Singapore, Admerix has production and resource development centers in Bangkok, Guangzhou, Hue, and Prague.



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