Translations: man vs machine

Many people have had frustrating experiences with machine translation. Some visited restaurants in foreign countries and could barely read the menus while others couldn't decipher warning signs in public areas. Computer translation errors can cause grave damage to businesses looking to sell their products and services globally. In China, there's an eatery called "Translate Server Error." Apparently, the owner wanted to translate the word restaurant and the machine produced an error message instead.

Verbal Ink, a translation services company, conducted two studies to show the disparity between human and computer translation. The results were displayed on an infographic and clearly show that computers are no match for humans when it comes to translation. This information may be hard to swallow considering that computers excel at virtually everything.

In the first study, some Spanish advertising material was translated by Google Translate.

Afterwards, a professional translator was given the same material to translate. The results were then compared. Google Translate only presented the overall idea. Its sentences were distorted and had to be revised for readability. The human translator, on the other hand, produced sensible sentences which were easy to understand. She used words that applied to the context.

In the second study, both translators were given the task of transcribing and translating words spoken by a Spanish speaker into English. Google Translate first transcribed the speech into written Spanish then translated the words into English. It did a fairly good job but failed to transcribe misspellings, repeated words, and other idiosyncrasies of human speech. The human translator performed much better. She understood what the speaker was trying to say and corrected errors and oddities like stammering. Her transcription was precise and stayed true to the original audio.

These two studies attest to the fact that human translation is superior to machine translation. While computers can translate numerous languages in milliseconds, humans are more accurate and comprehensible. Google Translate doesn't try to

understand or unravel sentences, it simply looks for similar translated texts online, finds the most likely match, and presents it as it is or with slight changes. Human translators understand that languages are much more than words strung together. They know how specific languages are spoken, understand the culture, and recognize the slang. This knowledge enables them to translate with precision.

People who want to know the diagnoses of their medical conditions, want to expand their companies internationally, or want opposing parties to make peace need living and breathing human translators, not machines.

View the infographic on verbalink.com

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