

Soft knowledge, soft target?

Translator *Adrian West* looks into the future of machine translation, and wonders if writers should be worried too

Exponents of the ‘innovation economy’ like to ridicule the notion of technological unemployment, which Keynes defined as ‘unemployment due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour.’ Thus the managing editor of the Associated Press claims that relegating AP’s corporate earnings reports to a machine is ‘about using technology to free journalists to do more journalism’; the Palo Alto-based Institute for the Future effervesces about a coming era of ‘human-machine partnership’; and a writer may presume her job safe from the intrusion of technology because of some skill – some quantum of ‘soft knowledge’, as it is known in Management Science – that a computer is incapable of mastering.

Such optimism makes me think of the horse, a beast whose strength and agility were for thousands of years so basic to all social endeavors as to lead Nigel Tallis of the British Museum to affirm that ‘the history of the horse is the history of civilization itself.’ As late as 1903, a Michigan banker advised Henry Ford’s attorney, who was then considering an investment in his client’s young company, to keep his money, with the words: ‘the horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty – a fad.’

For all of us who depend on labour – on writing – to guarantee our livelihood, the horse is our *Ozyamandias*. Jobs will remain, as advocates of ‘creative destruction’ ceaselessly intone (even today, there are a few jobs horses do better than machines), though their scarcity relative to the baffling number of people who will compete for them in the coming years means that compensation will shrivel and expected output balloon until the baseline of ordinary degradation hovers somewhere just shy of slavery. Beyond this, a few prestige sinecures will remain, positions directly dependent on the whimsies of the rich, a signal entertainment of whom, coincidentally, is the keeping of horses for exhibition or sport. Already the patronage model that sustained art and literature for hundreds of years seems to be returning in the avidity with which people who hide their earnings in tax shelters, lest they be squandered on education or public works, overpay gladly for anything with the label ‘artisanal’. Perhaps this munificence will one day extend to artists and poets, who may get their own bedroom in the homes of the very rich, right alongside the immigrant au pair.

I contemplate all this as a practitioner in the so-called *soft knowledge fields* of writing and translation. In my home country (the US), the current employment scenario seems to confute my cynicism: the Bureau of Labor Statistics does describe growth in the writing profession

as ‘anemic’, at 3% over the next ten years, but even my mother counselled me against putting my eggs in that basket, as the purported glamour of indulging one’s egotism for money will probably always appeal to more people than necessary; translation, however, is expected to rise by 46%.

There is debate over whether machine translation is a threat to translators’ livelihood. We like to poke fun at its incompetence. But then, a translator is capable of fits of bliss or vituperation at a nuanced or jarring rendering of a single word. I have recently run numerous sections of two books I am translating through Google Translate, to compare the results: the first is the novel *Roppongi* by the esteemed Austrian writer Josef Winkler, the second a Spanish period bestseller that I will call *The Cradle of the Beast*, for self-preservation’s sake. Predictably, the computer makes an illegible hash of the former’s abstruse, highly crafted German sentences; with the second, it doesn’t do half bad. The text yielded is far from publishable, but allows one to glimpse a day in the not-too-distant future when a translator, as opposed to going through an entire book line-by-line, could rather feed it into a machine-translator and spot-check it against the original, with the consequence that his work would become easier and less dependent on his individual talents. For a time, this may be beneficial, as technical progress allows him to take on more work; but, inevitably, the price for such labour will drop, more people will enter the field, and an exponential increase in output will be required in order to make the same money as before.

This is already the case in document translation, where fluency in such programs as SDL Trados, Wordfast or Memoq is often an explicit job requirement. By drawing on an extensive corpus of genre-specific terminology, these programs will automatically format a text in line with its original, translate parts of it outright, suggest translations for what remains, and assure a level of consistency in the use of terms, which is of particular importance with manuals and legal documents. This is alleged to be of advantage to the translator, who can work far more efficiently than before. What it means in practice is that many translators have seen their workloads multiply while their incomes have flatlined, particularly with the advent of crowdsourcing pages like ProZ and Translator’s Café, where hundreds of thousands of registered users compete for a relative paucity of jobs.

Intuition tells us that the place of human consciousness in expository writing is less fungible than in translation, but intuition is a poor judge and there are firms that think otherwise. Prominent among them

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is Narrative Science, a company promising to deliver 'meaning and insight in a form that makes natural sense to all of us, as narratives.' Its proprietary software, Quill, works to analyse data from websites and data sets and deliver them as reports written in natural language. Apart from analysing data for such Fortune 500 companies as Deloitte and Crédit Suisse, Narrative Science produces ready-made articles for Forbes and the Big Ten sports network, a Fox affiliate.

Kristian Hammon, the Chief Technology Officer for Narrative Science, predicted in 2012 that a computer-generated article would win the Pulitzer Prize for journalism within the next five years. Tech boosters are known for their outlandish predictions, which seem to charm venture capitalists as a pungi pipe charms a serpent; in fact, the columns it produces would be soporific, were they not so mercifully short. A great weakness of business people seems to be the inability to conceive of the world in terms that cannot be placed in air quotes; thus, when an article in *Wired* states of Narrative Science's software that 'users can customise the tone of any story – from breathless financial reporter to dry analyst,' the more humanistically inclined may ask why anyone would want to read something written by either; and yet...

In his classic critique of television news, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman avers, 'Each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility.' This is true not only of media themselves, but also of what they convey: each novel, song, or essay permits a certain kind of contemplation, and the effect is cumulative, so a long apprenticeship in nuanced thinking may yield a capacity thereto, and prolonged exposure to vulgar stupidity will dull the taste for anything subtler. To return to my earlier example: whereas popular novels like *The Cradle of the Beast* routinely sell hundreds of thousands of copies, writers of Josef Winkler's stature lie on the outer margins of what is thought to be commercially viable, their status preserved largely thanks to an ideal of high culture that increasingly looks like an anachronism. A big publisher may bet on another country's bestseller, but serious writing that makes it into English depends increasingly on non-profit publishers and cultural funds that austerity threatens to slash at any moment. Even the recourse of the university press is under threat, as institutions of higher learning cast aside their long-standing mission to disseminate knowledge in favour of the canting rhetoric of customer service.

To translate literature, you need a translator: someone with a knowledge of the author's work, with the patience to parse a long sentence, with the eye to notice that a given image is a hidden quote from a classic author, with the persistence to match cadences and registers. For *The Cradle of the Beast*, a computer almost does the trick. If the fragile cultural apparatus that makes it possible to get paid for doing the first were

to vanish (as it would already have done, were markets as rational as economists pretend), the financial burden I represent compared with a computer would surely come rapidly to light. It is true the computer makes mistakes; but as anyone who reads the newspapers, let alone online, can attest, the general tolerance for disjointed, misspelled, or ungrammatical text appears to be quite high. Keeping me around to double-check the computer's work might even prove too costly; after all, once readers are habituated to mangled writing, there will be no market-based reason to bother fixing it.

As for writing, it may indeed come to pass that Narrative Science wins its Pulitzer Prize; not because a computer has the capacity for literary excellence, but rather because of the seemingly limitless aptitude of technology to lull its consumers into inanition.