AI and literary translation: translators call for transparency.

With growing intensity, all of those involved in the book chain, whether as stakeholders or end users, are enthralled by the efficiency and accuracy of the results achieved by 'machine translation' for certain language pairs. The on-line appearance of ChatGPT has recently cast a harsh light on a future that is much closer than most of us imagined only a few years ago, particularly on the future of translators, illustrators and coders.

The paperback publisher Livre de Poche recently banned the use of image-generating algorithms for its covers, the first cases brought by authors against AI developers are under way, and some universities are banning their unsupervised use.

There is still time to act to protect artistic occupations from generating algorithms.

Having followed the development of translation-related professions and the conditions under which these have been practised for 50 years, ATLAS and ATLF are now sounding the alarm about the imminent dangers of AI in their field – literary translation – which needs to be defended as an essential and deeply human activity.

A profession of the mind that needs to remain independent of the developers of computer programs that are intelligent only in name.

1. The context: we're talking from experience, we're no longer speculating

After four years the 'Observatoire de la traduction automatique' , an annual study of 'machine translation' set up by ATLAS in 2018[1] ; on the occasion of a survey conducted by ATLF into 'post-editing'[2] with input from all French literary translators in December 2022; after the pioneering debate by the STAA: 'No to the automation of the artistic professions: translation isn't a problem to be solved[3]'; after listening carefully to other translation professionals who have already been overwhelmed by AI at the Assises de la traduction littéraire in Arles in November 2022: ATAA (Association of Translators/Adaptors in Audio-visual) and SFT (French Society of Translators)[4] our two organisations issue a public warning about the industrialisation of this technology and **call for immediate transparency on the part of book professionals about these practices** which also generate a considerable amount of digital pollution.

2. What is human translation?

'Translation is not a problem to be solved[5]', the STAA (Syndicat des Travailleurs.euses Artistes Auteurs) wrote last November in their statement against the automation of the artistic professions. Translation is a trade, a skill, a creative act, a human experience. It is a fascinating, reflexive and eminently subjective discipline that trains in the use of language as a tool of emancipation and not as a standardised norm. In response to the question, 'does being able to translate mean loving density?' the academic Barbara Cassin replied: 'Yes (...) but it also means being able to cut, to free oneself, to choose, to play, knowing how to be light.'[6]

Human translation praises difference, it renders explicit the intrinsic gap that exists between languages by celebrating it. We translators don't want a universally *Globish* literature that elevates communication above language, the word, exchange. We want to go on learning languages and practising them, we want to go on 'complicating the

---

[1] https://www.atlas-citl.org/lobservatoire-de-la-traduction-automatique/
[2] https://atlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ENQUETE-TRADUCTION-AUTOMATIQUE.pdf
[3] https://cnt-so.org/staa/2022/11/11/non-a-lautomatisation-des-metiers-de-lart/
[4] Table ronde 'Métiers de la traduction : ce qu'automatiser veut dire'
[5] Tribune du STAA, November 2022.
[6] Revue Geste, 'Le plaisir de traduire – entretien avec Barbara Cassin', 2007

universal', 'translating what a text does and not what a text says.'[7] In agreement with Barbara Cassin, we claim translation as one of the fundamentals: 'Reading, writing, counting, speaking languages, translating.'[8]

If the activity of literary translation were to disappear, we would lose an extraordinary tool of mental training. Every literary text is full of ambiguities, of holes that we translators are called upon to fill. Everyone who thinks in terms of translation, everyone who has practised it, knows: **one does not translate words, but an intention, implications, equivocations, that which is not said and yet lives within the folds of a literary text.**

As some of its most attentive readers, while making the first version of a work of translation we help to create the meaning of the literary text, while the intervention of a machine that 'pre-translates' using algorithms (AI) deprives us of that crucial 'first draft'.

This is something that we will come back to.

3. Why AI, and where does it come from?

First of all, let us discuss the anthropological framework within which the technology called AI developed. This will be crucial in helping us understand the world that it defends and underpins.

At the last Assises de la traduction littéraire in Arles, Yaëlle Amsalem, PhD candidate in management and postgraduate student at Berkeley University, gave an account of her work on the transhumanist ideals of Silicon Valley, which set in motion the technological developments that we are now witnessing. Tech pioneers were brought up on the ideas of the American counter-culture, seeing technology as a tool of liberation from the centralised state.

As far as they were concerned what was required was a massive increase in human potential (psychological, physical and intellectual), since computers were perceived as a new form of consciousness-expanding LSD. Today we find part of that 'libertarian' discourse in individuals such as Elon Musk and other directors of powerful digital companies.

[7] Barbara CASSIN, Éloge de la traduction: compliquer l'universel, Paris, Fayard, 2016.
[8] Revue Geste, op.cit.

As so often, it's the fear of being left behind, of missing a technological opportunity that leads first the US and then the states of Europe to follow suit and invest massively in this research.

The DeepTech plan adopted by the French state in 2019 – which included an investment of 30 billion Euros between now and 2030 – was topped up in January 2023 by an additional package of 500 million Euros.

The creation of 100 DeepTech unicorn companies and 500 start-ups per year by 2030 was supposed to help Europe catch up with the United States and China. The European Parliament acknowledged in an announcement on 3 September 2020 that 'the Union has a fundamental obligation to promote the sharing of the benefits of AI, utilising a number of tools, including investment in research in all Member States.[9]

We are thus witnessing a growing number of interactions between research in the sectors of nanotechnology, biotechnology, computer science and cognitive science, identified by the term 'NBIC convergence'. It is feared that the discussion surrounding the ethical challenges arising out of all of this will be unilaterally declared a rear-guard action, that these questions are not considered high priority today, and that they bring few solid guarantees for a thoughtful use of this technology, even though the consequences on human life threaten to be dizzying.

4. How does AI work in translation?

Anne-Marie Robert, representative of the SFT, specialist in technical translation, herself a user of CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) software, pointed out during the same 39th Assises de la traduction littéraire: so-called 'neural' translation (Neural Machine Translation or NMT) is based on deep learning, an automatic training of the computer which modifies its digital code as it is fed by big data, thus drawing inspiration (for free) from human translations, and correcting what it sees as errors because they are statistically less frequent.

It is high time to change the terms to be as close as possible to current technological developments. AI is not 'intelligent', it imitates human behaviour by plundering what humans have created. So there is an urgent need to shed light on the consequences of the unbridled anthropomorphism that leads us to confuse intelligence and performance.

---

[9] Opinion of the Committee on Culture and Education for the Committee on Legal Affairs on intellectual property rights for the development of artificial intelligence technologies (2020/2015(INI)), leading to the resolution of the European Parliament on 20 October 2020 on intellectual property rights for the development of technologies connected with artificial intelligence.

We should stop talking about 'machine translation' and instead speak of 'machine output'[10] or perhaps 'pre-translation'[11] generated by algorithms which, to be precise, is a 'transcoding of a written text in one language into another language via generative algorithms', as the STAA points out.[12] And finally, let us not forget that within the context of an industrial AI referred to as 'translating' (DeepL, Google Translate or others), the text is machine-generated, not *created*.[13]

So when otherwise respectable media choose to use AI to produce a text in French from one written in another source language, using the words '*We* have translated' when introducing some article or other – no, those media did *not* translate it. Here's what they did: they had a text that was written in one language transcoded into another language via the generative algorithms of a software developed by a start-up, and then, at best, they had a human being revise it.

DeepL is not, as the company boasts on its website, the 'best translator in the world', for the simple reason that it *isn't* a translator.

AI is not an innocent tool, as some maintain. And in any case, can it really be called a tool if it enslaves us in the long term? And if we see it as a tool now, will we always be its master?

Here is the issue: the risk of massively alienating translation professionals, unable to manage the way a tool works and the conditions in which it is used, over which they therefore have no control, and which may well be imposed upon them. Let us listen to our comrades in SFT and ATAA, who told us last November in Arles that this was already happening in so-called 'pragmatic' translation, and particularly in subtitling jobs for streaming platforms. In this sense the ATLF survey is sadly very telling: in 92% of cases of orders for 'post-editing' of a machine-generated text, the publisher did not specify the 'tool' employed.

So why use DeepL and Google Translate rather than have a text translated directly by someone employed to do so?

To reduce costs and deadlines, purely and simply.

Those who embrace such practices should be made to own them – that's what we're asking them to do.

---

[10] Term suggested by Rudy Look, director of the Masters in Specialist Multilingual Translation at Lille University, at the conference 'Éthique et traduction à l'ère contemporaine', 13-14 February 2023 at Avignon University.

[11] Anne-Marie Robert, representing the Société française des traducteurs (SFT), at the round table « Métiers de la traduction : ce qu'automatiser veut dire » – 39es Assises de la traduction littéraire, Arles, 2022.

[12] Syndicat des travailleurs et travailleuses artistes-auteur.ices, CNT-SO. Read the accounts given by Laurent Vannini, translator, and Ombremonde, illustrator, in Le Monde 23 January 2023.

[13] Jonathan Seror, lawyer with l'Association des Traducteurs Littéraires de France (ATLF), during the ATLAS/ATLF round table « Métiers de la traduction: ce qu'automatiser veut dire » – 39es Assises de la traduction littéraire, Arles, 2022.

We ask them to understand without delay that our profession is undergoing such violent upheavals that many of us will soon be unable to exercise it, not to mention the linguistic, artistic and cultural impoverishment that the massification of the use of this technology implies for readers and society as a whole. The studies carried out so far, notably the work of Waltraud Kolb, researcher at the Centre for Translation Studies at Vienna University, into the time-saving supposedly achieved by 'post-editing' provide no obvious answer, since working speed varies from one individual to another. So at this stage it cannot even be taken for granted that the quickest of translators is unable to work faster than the 'fastest of post-editors':[14] what is beyond dispute, however, is that the extreme acceleration of production processes and ever shorter deadlines introduce a tension that is harmful to the health and quality of life of translators.

5. What are the real-life consequences of the mass deployment of this algorithmic technology?

In a context of falling incomes for translators, leading to a strong temptation to accept badly paid commissions in order to survive, it may be worth reminding our readers of the extreme fragility of our working conditions.[15] Those conditions are deteriorating: the rate per page is not going up - in fact it's dropping, just as royalties are slowing to a trickle; many of us find ourselves in a very precarious situation (it should be pointed out here that in France artists and authors have no right to unemployment benefit, for example). On top of this there is a regular drop in the foreign rights purchases by publishers,[16] and in the circulation of ideas, with the Anglo-Saxon market continuing to dominate to a huge extent. Under these conditions, do we really want to delegate our thoughts and skills not just to 'machines', but to those who profit from them at our expense?

---

[14] Observatoire de la traduction automatique d'ATLAS (an 04), directed by the translator Sophie Royère – 39es Assises de la traduction littéraire, Arles, 2022.

[15] Cf. La situation socioéconomique des traducteurs littéraires, a survey carried out under Olivia Guyon, senior lecturer in economics, July 2020, ATLF, and Survey on Working Conditions 2020, CEATL. See also *Translators on the cover: Multilingualism & translation*: report of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) working group of EU Member State experts. EU publication.

[16] See the latest figures published by SNE: percentage of the number of books translated in 2016 (18.3%) against 15.9% in 2020-2021.

What's at stake is the alienation and survival of our profession.

'The industrial revolution replaced our muscles with machines, and now the digital revolution is replacing our brains,' said Laura Hurot, a translator from the German who was a guest at the ATLAS Observatoire de la Traduction automatique (year 4), on this occasion giving a very accurate account the thought of the philosopher Hartmut Rosa: shorter deadlines and pressure of time are responsible for the phenomenon of burn-out; the same is true of the accelerated translation processes implied by the use of AI. What are the consequences for the fundamental wellbeing of working people?

Anchoring bias

At the 39th Assises de la traduction littéraire in Arles, Waltraud Kolb, Assistant Professor of Literary Translation at the University of Vienna, (Austria), reported the results of a study carried out with ten literary translators, invited to translate a short story by Ernest Hemingway ('A Very Short Story'). The study asked five of them to translate the text from English to German from the original alone, and five others to start with the original and a machine 'pre-translation'. One seemingly very simple phrase captured the attention: 'Luz sat on the bed.' According to how the sentence is read, we can hear that the action is completed or not completed. Luz was sitting, or sat down. Logically enough, interpretations diverged among translators in the first group, while the five others all opted for the solution made by the machine translation. That is anchoring bias.

The question is not a secondary one, in the sense that, as we know, this acceleration process has already been made in the field of so-called 'pragmatic' translation with CAT, and also threatens the field of subtitling. How far are we willing to go? There is a danger that the acceleration process will continue. To keep up with the competition, will we have to work harder and harder, without being consulted on the matter?[17] 'The human being can sprint, but not for six hours at a time', in the words of Laura Hurot. People needed to be told of the damaging consequences of acceleration.

In the end, what is one trying to get by putting a text through an algorithmic food mill, then having it 'revised' by a human being, whether or not they are a professional translator? An apparently correct and idiomatic text, or a text to which we can put our name, as is the case with a translated and commercialised book of which the translator is the legal author? And what new kinds of cognitive effort does 'post-editing' demand of us? Waltraud Kolb asks. When we are made second fiddle to AI, the machine already gives us a first interpretation of the text. When dealing with two source texts rather than one, and

[17] On the concept of 'dynamic stabilisation', developed by Hartmut Rosa, see *Aliénation et accéleration*, trans. Thomas Chaumont, Paris, éditions de la Découverte, 2014.

faced with an increased cognitive burden, the human brain is more inclined to accept the machine's suggestions, with all the obvious consequences that we can imagine on the very nature of the future target text, smoothed out and normalised by this 'anchorage bias'. (See box above)

This process has already begun among subtitlers. Stéphanie Lenoir of the ATAA confirmed, at the last Assises de la traduction littéraire, the temptation in studios tasked with subtitling of ordering 'post-edited' machine translations. Some already speak of 'good enough quality', at corresponding rates, while their clients insist on their deep attachment to quality. It is not a matter of opposing technological developments on principle, but this development removes translators from their creative role and implies a normalisation of what they produce: the stylistic contribution of the adaptor is erased; it is this aspect that is disturbing, according to Stéphanie Lenoir, who sees it as an 'unfathomable question'.

Aside from this, let us remember that human intervention in the revision of a 'pre-translation' may be reintroduced into the machine, feeding it for free without any remuneration, and without the author of the text even being informed of the fact. We are thus being asked to boost and reinforce technologies that harm our profession.

In concrete terms, this is a raid on our skills and creations, which it will be very difficult to combat as the law stands. 'Style is common property', and demonstrating forgery will prove to be very complicated, because 'AI digests the works of artists to such an extent that those influences are reused in too hybrid a form to justify an accusation of forgery'.[18]

Jonathan Seror, lawyer for ATLF, explains that we need to distinguish the before and after in the case of a text that has been automatically pre-translated and then revised by a human. At the beginning of the process, the machine is massively dependent on data created by humans ('metadata'); it appropriates and reproduces elements that might be protected by copyright. So what is the status of those data?

If we were to apply the rules of French droit d'auteur, this would constitute forgery. But how can plagiarism be proved, given the hybrid character of these productions, and in view of the absolute opacity of the working of AI's generative algorithms?

At the 39th Assises de la traduction littéraire, Jonathan Seror also pointed out the exception of 'text and data mining'. In the field of scientific research, it allows the use of a colossal quantity of texts and data in digital form to release information from them without the permission of the authors.

It is not true today, but 'tomorrow, this exception might be extended to commercial ends', and allow on to the market translation software that has digested millions of works. At the end of the process, we must ask ourselves the question of the status of the machine-generated text. In French law, copyright applies to 'an original work of the mind', and an author is 'a physical person'. In the case of a text 'pre-translated' by AI and then revised by a

---

[18] *Le Monde*, dossier on ChatGPT and OpenAI (23.01.2023).

human, who is the author? The developer? The owner? The client who uses the software? The human who does the revising?

Is there a rights-holder of the text produced in this way? We do not yet have an answer.

What is beyond dispute is that without a legislative framework the practice is damaging to the working conditions of literary translators. So, for example, the ATLF survey into 'post-editing' shows that 14% of respondents have been asked by publishers to undertake 'post-editing' work. Among the 61% who accepted these tasks, not only was there a great variation in the basis on which rates were calculated (lump sum, remuneration by page or by hour), but more importantly, more than half of those surveyed stated that they had been paid by invoice, since publishers saw them as service providers with the status of businesspeople (as well as the status of artist-author). This need for multiple kinds of legal status is a further cause of precarity.

We must not endanger our status as authors by agreeing to be service-providers. However, as soon as we rewrite something, we create a work that is protected by copyright as long as it 'bears the imprint of the author's personality'. How can that imprint be quantified in these conditions?

We do not want to become machine operators or assistants, 'quality controllers at the service of optimisation', in Laura Hurot's words. We cannot accept this hidden work involved at either end of the making of a text that is destined to be sold as a product. The alienation of book professionals prefigures that of eventual readers, just as the productions of audio-visual platforms take their lead from the assumed expectations of their users, on the basis of algorithms. Publishers will sell a work of inferior quality at the same price.

There are some telling figures which illustrate the problem: according to Anne-Marie Robert and a study carried out by the SFT, 27% of pragmatic translators have already started making use of 'pre-translation' tools without being asked to.[19]

6. What should we do today?

We call for transparency and the adoption of clear positions on the subject by book chain stakeholders.[20] There are many ways of protecting human translation, and it is up to us to invent them collectively.

---

[19] Statistical report on the translating professions SFT 2022.

[20] The Proposal for a Regulation on artificial intelligence of the European Parliament and of the Council, laying down harmonised rules, does not go far enough in terms of obligations of transparency, since article 52 [('Transparency obligations for certain AI systems') decrees that 'Providers shall ensure that AI systems intended to interact with natural persons are designed and developed in such a way that natural persons are informed that they are interacting with an AI system, unless this is obvious from the circumstances and the context of use.' The idea of interaction

No public assistance for companies that have opted for intellectual laziness and irresponsible pursuit of profit, for example. But also by resorting to law. Modes of translation are not specified in publishing and within the framework of ceding foreign rights,

We must demand that the publisher provide information on how a translation has been carried out in the case of 'pre-translation' by AI: this would mean authors being able to refuse to allow their texts to be treated in this way, by developing new contractual practices which would allow their work to be translated without the use of machine 'pre-translation', or by imposing a human literary translator.

While our brains still belong to us, let's use them to halt this abrogation of thought.

---

obviously poses a problem, because a book translated automatically should not be affected by this transparency obligation.

What ATLF and ATLAS want

We are defending a profession, and those who practise it with love and skill; we need to react now, not close our eyes to this mechanisation and restriction of creativity: resist, refuse, combat.

No, it's not too late, and no, we don't want to start thinking about how to 'recycle' ourselves, about how to 'reinvent' and 'convert' ourselves to comply with this vacuous pursuit of profitability regardless of the cost.

For several decades, Darwinian evolutionary theories of selection via competition have been complemented by observations by biologists regarding cooperation as a selective advantage. It is time to abandon blind belief in competition.

We refuse to allow this technology to be seen as translation, because unlike translation this technology smooths out texts, voices and thoughts. It sabotages the creativity required for human fulfilment. In concrete terms, if we use this software for professional purposes we risk feeding and working for free for multinationals and unicorn businesses without ethical scruples.

We reject the diktat of imposed linguistic uniformity: no, a good translation made by a good translator does not need to be invisible to be judged as good; it must live, breathe, rebuild within itself the entire world of the original text, dare to be different, and lay claim to that difference.

We demand that machine pre-translated texts be identified as such, and call for total transparency with regard to these practices where they are already being used in publishing.

Conclusion

ATLF and ATLAS call for support for translators and their profession.

To all authors, publishers and readers, literary agents, newspaper editors, journalists, bloggers, librarians, booksellers, distributors, public authorities, cultural structures and associations, all those who make foreign literature accessible and who love it, those who read it and those who make it, we say: defend translators, defend authors, support their work, reject AI in the creative professions and demand transparency.

AI is not a simple tool, it swallows up human creativity, it smooths things out, it normalises, it optimises.

'Culture cannot be an adjustment variable,' the current minister of culture, Rima Abdul-Malak says, and neither can translators.

Following on from the work undertaken by the Syndicat des Travailleurs et travailleuses Artistes-Auteurices (STAA),[21] we call on professional authors' organisations (in the field of writing, the visual arts and music) to join forces and coordinate their actions.

---

[21] To understand the stakes of automation in the visual arts, read also the STAA's article on this subject: https://staa-cnt-so.org/2023/03/17/non-a-lautomatisation-des-metiers-de-lart-2/.

Complementary sister associations, ATLF and ATLAS are the two French associations representing literary translators. Active since the 1970-1980s, they are at the forefront when it comes to expounding, defending and supporting translation and those who live from it and let it live.

ATLF (Association des traducteurs littéraires de France), founded in 1973, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Dedicated to the defence of literary translation and the people who practise it, the association now has a thousand members. ATLF is a member of the Conseil permanent des écrivains, in which context it engages in negotiations with the Syndicat national de l'édition. ATLF is also represented in CEATL, which brings together European associations of literary translators, as well as AFDAS and the new organisation of social security for artist-authors (SSAA). ATLF translators also sit on the management committees of CNL and IRCEC. ATLF also works actively in promoting and developing the work of literary translation through regular surveys (remuneration, sociology, working practices), and by organising slams and round table discussions at literary festivals. The association's mission is also to defend and assert the rights of translators through its specialist legal service.

ATLAS – Association for the promotion of literary translation – is a general-interest cultural associations based between Arles and Paris. For 40 years it has supported, accompanied and promoted translators and their profession by organising meetings and literary events (including the Assises de la traduction littéraire in Arles and the Printemps de la Traduction in Paris), translation workshops and cultural activities across the whole metropolitan territory, regular programmes of lifelong learning specially designed for translators, literary translation prizes and the development of the national and international network of the translation community, notably around its historic residency open to professionals from all over the world who translate from or into French: the Collège international des traducteurs littéraires (CITL) in Arles.

Glossary

ATAA

Association des traducteurs/adaptateurs de l'audiovisuel (Association of Audiovisual Translators/Adaptors), set up in 2006, which brings together hundreds of professional authors in dubbing, subtitling and voice-over.

CAT

Translation performed by a human with the support of translation memory software, which retranslates words, phrases or sentences that occur several times in the same text, and may include a revision tool.

DA

Droits d'auteur, author's rights. In France today, literary translators are paid in author's rights, in exchange for the cession of the commercial rights of the work that they have created. These author's rights are divided between the advance calculated by page, and proportional rights (a percentage of the sales of the works translated), generally set off against the advance.

NMT

Neural Machine Translation. Transcoding operation from one language to another made by an algorithm based on the principles of the neural network, based on huge databases

'Post-editing'

Task entrusted to a translator consisting of rewriting a machine-generated text (the phrase 'machine output' is also used), based or not on the source text in the original language.

SFT

The Société française des traducteurs (SFT) is a professional trade union committed to defending the interests of translators and interpreters. It has over 1600 members.

Translated by Shaun Whiteside