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## Translation tools end Tower of Babylon

6/25/2002 9:40:26 AM - The public sector accounts for a big part of the \$450 million translation market in Canada

by Geoffrey Downey

One of the charms and frustrations of travelling to a country where you don't speak the local language is overcoming this barrier.

For the most part you can get by with awkward smiles, gestures and patience, but we are often left to depend on signs and literature in our native tongue to carry the day. The reasoning is someone has spent the time — if not the money — to lend a helping hand. The results, however, are mixed. They vary from the laughable (Teeth extracted by latest Methodists, brags a Hong Kong dentist in an ad) to the borderline incomprehensible (Do not enter the lift backwards, and only when lit up, warns a sign in an elevator in Leipzig, Germany).

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While it is unlikely these kinds of gaffes would lead to any damaging repercussions, the same cannot be said of similar errors on government Web sites and documents. As the public sector looks to make itself more

accessible to French and English-speaking Canadians (as well as other countries) and take advantage of the e-economy, translation tools are becoming a more important part of the equation. The Canadian Translation Industry Sectoral Committee estimates the public sector accounts for \$165 million of Canada's \$450 million translation market in 1999.

When it comes to translation software users have two options: aids for translation (AT) and machine translation (MT) systems. MTs translate documents without human intervention, while ATs are used in conjunction with a person and "do not translate texts, strictly speaking, but are a special kind of database in which are stored translations that can be used again later," according to the CTISC definition. While in essence the tools perform the same task, the conditions under which they are used are considerably different.

Paris-based Softissimo got into the linguistics business 10 years ago, but began

making MT software five years ago. It counts the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, McGill University, Hydro Québec and the Royal Military College of Canada among its 3,000 Canadian users. President and co-founder Théo Hoffenberg says the need for translation tools is growing because traditional barriers between nations (borders and currency) are falling. The only hurdle left, he says, is language, and that's where Reverso Pro 5 steps in.

Hoffenberg says the desktop-based MT integrates with Microsoft Office programs such as Word, Outlook, Internet Explorer and Excel. In conjunction with a customizable dictionary, the translation engine scans a document and produces a converted version. If the original document is written with translation in mind, he says there is a "90 to 95 per cent chance of getting something very good," and is done 50 to 70 per cent faster than a translator could do it.

IBM is also in the MT business. It recently launched WebSphere Translation Server 2.0, and according to Brian Garr, the public sector is a growing customer. The program manager for voice and translation offerings, IBM Canada, says more and more people are receiving e-mail in foreign languages.

"The typical implementation of that is to have what we call a robot. You may have an e-mail address where you can send things to and it automatically gets translated and sent back to you," Garr says.

Hoffenberg says the Internet is also playing a role in not only erasing borders but driving the speed at which the service is required. Garr says Translation Server addresses this issue. "One of the neater implementations in the long run is multi-lingual chat, where people are using same-time chat for customer service and further conversations between two people who happen not to speak the same language."

Garr points out, however, MT is an assimilation tool and not a dissemination program.

"That's the wrong way to implement it because they're not aware of and prepared for the vagaries of machine translation. We do believe very strongly in disclaimers. We're doing science not art; what a professional translator does is art." (See sidebar for writing tips.)

"The biggest hurdle to the technology is that people don't know it exists," Garr says. "I like to say it's a 50-year-old technology that's becoming an overnight success. There have been so many improvements because of faster processors, new algorithms, research, etc., that now I think is the time when machine translation will make its imprint."

Regardless of how it's written, Micheline Cloutier says MT is ill-suited for most translation jobs. The president of Ottawa-based Terminotix Inc. says it will give you very good results if you're doing something like the weather forecast. "If you are translating types of documents that come out of the federal government, there's no way you can use automatic (machine) translation. It will take three times as much an effort to revise what the machine has done."

Terminotix makes an AT and document management application called LogiTerm. Cloutier says one of the features is called bitext, which allows a translator to view the source and target-language document side by side. The bitexts, she says, are created in HTML. This allows users to send a copy and the recipient doesn't need proprietary software to view it.

SourceCAN is travelling the AT route. SourceCAN was created in June 2001 as a partnership between Industry Canada, the Canadian Commercial Corp. and HyperNet Inc. Its purpose is to link Canadian products and services with business opportunities posted by domestic and foreign corporations and governments through an international tender feeding system.

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To capitalize on foreign markets, it has contracted Toronto-based WebViews to translate its e-portal marketplace. SourceCAN senior commerce officer and project manager David Chase says the site is being translated into Spanish and Portuguese because it is pushing into Latin America extensively and into Chinese because of China's ascension into the World Trade Organization. Japanese and German are next on the list.

Like Terminotix, WebViews makes an AT tool, Inter Language Paradigm (ILM), and has several public sector clients, including the Department of Foreign Affairs. The nature of its service, however, presents more challenges than a desktop app. Manoo Missaghi, chairman and CEO of WebViews, says what it does is copy everything on the source Web site, from HTML files, asp files and database records. Then ILM, with the help of human translators in the target country, rebuilds the site in the new language.

Missaghi calls the process localization and not translation because it does more than swap one language for another. He says Web sites are composed on several layers — the presentation layer, data layer and the application program layer — and work needs to be done at each one.

He uses the example of a technical support phone number on a Web site translated into German. It doesn't make sense, he says, for the page to list a number that would connect the user to someone who speaks English. So not only must the language make sense, but links, graphics and applications must as well.

"You need to go and change the currency to their currency and the algorithm by which you are calculating, let's say, the goods that you are delivering. We will do it at all layers so that it will look as if it was designed for that audience," Missaghi says.

Chase says he is confident this is the best solution, but it was not without problems early on.

"We have firewalls, and to get through to us exactly what they wanted probably took a week. They weren't talking our tech talk and we didn't quite understand why they needed our source codes," Chase says.

While it took more time up front to get going, it is now reaping the rewards. Chase says all the sites have been synchronized and any content changes are automatically reflected across the board within 24 hours.

What remains a mystery, however, is the return on investment, but Chase is unconcerned.

"I think we will be saving money, but it's more important that we can brand Canada and its capabilities to the world," Chase says. "I think that's a tremendous advantage. We all think everyone speaks English or French, when in fact . . ."

And on the Web, all the awkward smiles, gestures and patience won't get you anywhere.

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