Machine translation — a substitute of human translation?

It is argued that human translation, a traditional way to interpret one language into another, has high accuracy and quality. However, with the development of technology, there appears to be a new way to accomplish this goal, which is called machine translation. The high cost and low efficiency of human translation seem to reduce the competitiveness with respect to machine translation at this current stage.

Nevertheless, human translation remains its dominant position comparing with machine translation. According to House (2009), Machine translation could be “fully automatic or semi-automatic”. Machine translation often makes mistakes both in cohesion and coherence, which makes its semantic meaning difficult to understand. Fully automatic translation means all of the original text is translated by machine. In other words, it is not accurate but efficient. But if people need accurate translation, they may edit the text by themselves after automatic translation, which is called semi-automatic translation. In this way, the final version depends more on human translators anyway.

Machine translation could help human translators in different ways. However, admitting that machine translation has many advantages, it has many unavoidable defects. The writer believes it is unlikely that software will replace human translation thoroughly.

After going through this article, we have a deep thinking and interest upon translation. In the referenced essay, it mentions that machine translation can be helpful to human translation, even though it is confusing. However, we only know it is helpful, but do not know from what aspect it is helpful.

The new information we learned from the essay is the functions of machine translation and the writer’s opinion towards machine translation. Firstly, most translation software can act not only as translators but also as an online encyclopedia. It means it can offer the knowledge of lexical items and professional terms which may not be familiar for people and assist people to understand better.

Secondly, the result of machine translation can offer a reference to translators who create the machine translation to revise the translating procedures of machine translation.

Thirdly, the author thinks machine translation can act as a helper but cannot replace human translation. So far, the machine translation can only produce very rough drafts (“quick and dirty first versions”). It is very useful for translators to keep away from boring and time-costing routine, which spares time for translators to do less mechanical and more creative part.

However, some of us support the author’s opinion whereas others against it.

For the part that support impossibility of replacement, our group mates give further reasons to support.

Firstly, languages could be developing. As has known, “Language is a complex adaptive system”(Beckner et al. 2009). It means languages could expand or evolve swiftly. However, as the creation of human, most machine translation depends upon the procedures to work. If people want machine translation to be effective, people need to update it to keep pace with languages. However, the upgrade of procedure can never keep up with this expansion, since the evolution of language can always be prior.

Secondly, the process of translation is to reintegrate the original text. Within one text, there are not only meanings and feelings but also implications, which may be the most important part of a text. Software may not be able to operate well. Translating a text with underlying meaning can hardly be perfect through machine. As Wilks says (2008), the result of machine translation is improved continuously, but the result is still not satisfied. The main problem is the difficulty for machine to find suitable meaning of words within different context.

As for the disagreement towards author’s idea, they also give their reasons.

Firstly, machine translation can cover numerous languages and different areas, which is hard for human translators to achieve. In fact, many activities such as traveling and trading enjoy the convenience of machine translation. For example, Google Translate has 200 million users a month by the last count, and translates the equivalent of the whole annual output of the global professional translator corps in a single day (Machine translation: Babel or babble, 2012). It is believed that machine translation will obtain a bright future.

Furthermore, human has not realized how the brain works on language, it is impossible to make machine work as human when translating (John ,2001, p.2). But in recent years, research teams of some companies such as Google and Microsoft, have used "Deep Learning" (Wei, 2016, ¶3), a kind of artificial intelligence, to improve the quality of translation, and obtained prominent results. Machine translation could be expected to exceed human translation after the introduction of the strong AIT system.

With the development of database, statistical machine translation has also made a great progress in accuracy. For example, Google translation can be correctly though it sometimes makes jokes. If you transfer “love me, love my dog” into Chinese, we will obtain the Chinese idiom “love the house, love the crow on the house”(爱屋及乌). When machine cooperates with big data, it could obtain data about different language styles and connect one cultural meaning into another, though the machine may not really “understand”. According to what Kurzweil said to Huffington Post (2011), machine’s quality of translation will reach the level of humans by the year 2029 (¶2). Another bottle-neck issue about expression will be solved in this big data age and machine translation may finally replace human in the future.

No matter which opinion we hold, we all agree that machine translation needs to be improved, which has attracted our interests of learning linguistic and translation.

Machine translation is the cooperative product of translation studies and programming technologies. Translation plays an important role in machine translation. Machine translation at this stage remains backward. Therefore, for more practical and efficient use of machine translation, we want to attach great interest to translation and help improve the function of machine translation.

The answer of “whether machine translation could replace human translation” has not been found yet, because it is an open-ended question. However, we are curious about it and we want to explore the answer to the question. If it is possible, we want to make a positive contribution to the research of machine translation which also creates our interest towards translation as well.

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