

Bilingualism – The Myths and the Truth

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Abstract: *The article defines corpus-based machine translation and its possible applications in machine translation. The study is based on a bilingual corpus of texts and translation unit alignment. The criteria used for alignment combine linguistic and statistical information. Quite often you will be faced with the layman's question, 'How many languages do you speak?'. It is quite possible to translate a language without being able to speak it – a fact that may surprise some people*

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Introduction

The term 'bilingual' is very much abused and the number of people who are truly bilingual is very small. You may have seen job advertisements for a 'Bilingual Secretary'. I suppose the argument is that a person who is that well qualified would not be working as a secretary. (This is no reflection on the abilities of a good secretary.) The number of people who are listed in the ITI Directory as being competent to work in more than one language is very small. There is a term called 'language of habitual use'. You may have learned one language as a child and then moved to a different country.

The language of that country will probably become your language of habitual use. There is also the term 'main language' in use in the European Community. The ITI demands evidence of any claim to be bilingual before the person concerned can be listed as having this qualification.

The 'main language' would be the natural choice for listing in the directory. Assessment of any claim for an additional language is done by taking an examination or submitting written evidence in support of the claim. Certainly in the Western world, it would appear that English (in its various guises) is the lingua franca.

Materials and methods

Statistics indicate that as a result of Sweden, Finland and others joining the European Union, English is the most widely used language in the European Union. This is confirmed by a report in the Financial Times (Ref. 4) that quotes an unpublished survey of more than 1 billion document pages translated at the European Commission. This states that 42% were translated from English compared with 40% from French. The booklet was published entitled Bilingual Skills Certificate and Certificate in Community Interpreting.

It offers the following definitions on bilingualism: Bilingual service providers are people who possess two sets of skills – language and professional skills, so that they can give the same standard of service in the context of two languages and cultures. In order to provide an equal standard of service to all clients, the people providing the service should have adequate standards of training and qualifications in both sets of skills. For example, allowing people to give medical advice or gather information upon which medical decisions are made when they are not qualified and solely on the grounds that they happen to speak French or Urdu is as bad as giving good medical advice which cannot be understood.

Total bilingualism means having an equal or complete functional competence in two languages, which involves an equal understanding of both cultures. Bilingualism is usually described as using two languages in daily life – but not necessarily in the same context. Therefore, one can be bilingual but not have a command of both languages in the same subject area.

Bilingual service providers should have an adequate competence in both languages and an objective understanding of the implications concerning both cultures in the subject area in which they work. Being bilingual does not necessarily include the ability to interpret or translate. This requires additional skills in order to transfer concepts between languages. I have used Swedish as a working language for more than 40 years and have translated the language for almost that length of time. I speak the language almost every day and spend weeks at a time working in Sweden. Yet I would shy clear of submitting a translation into Swedish unless it were to be used purely for information purposes. Yes, you may be able to translate quite correctly into a foreign language but it will eventually become evident that the translation was not written by a 'native'. The only way to get around this is to get the

text checked by a ‘native’, but this is usually an unsatisfactory compromise. Probably the least satisfactory task is ‘laundering’ a text produced by a non-native speaker and given to you with the bland statement, ‘I’ve already translated this, will you please have a quick look at it just to check the English’. More often than not, it is quicker to translate the piece afresh.

The person submitting the request is under the illusion that he is saving money in this way. He will no doubt have spent some considerable time on producing the draft and it is difficult to tell the person concerned that the time may have been less than productive. An example is given in the appendix. You can, of course, learn something from the terminology used in some cases.

Result and discussion

If I do not feel happy about accepting a ‘laundering’ assignment, I will politely decline the offer and explain the reasons why. The following is an example of such a text written by a Swede. It took the best part of an hour to try and make sense of what was written, whereas a clean translation from Swedish into English would have taken half the time. Asterisks are used to disguise the guilty. There are times when your diplomacy will be tested since there are people who, having a knowledge of a foreign language, will question your use of that language. Let us assume for the sake of example that this is English. Such people come in a number of categories:

Those who have a basic knowledge of English and who wish merely to criticise either

- to demonstrate their knowledge or just for the sake of it. I have seen many cases where people have ‘corrected’ a translation and have introduced errors. To these people all you can do is point out the error(s) and perhaps explain what would be the consequence of retaining it (them). Those whose style differs from yours. If this style is more appropriate, then accept it.

- After all, the client should know his business and you should be receptive to constructive comments. Those who can offer constructive comments

- in terms of terminology – again, here is an opportunity to enhance your expertise. The letter below is not untypical.

Conclusion

It was sent to a large number of potential clients in the United Kingdom from an estate agent in Sweden with the aim of attracting interest in a property just north of Stockholm. Only the names have been removed to protect the guilty. I later heard a comment from a cynic who reckoned that the letter was written in this way to guarantee that it would be the centre of discussion! Be philosophical – you can always learn from the mistakes of others.

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