

## Current and Future Trends in Machine Translation and Their Impact on Translators

A review of Myriam Siftar's presentation at the 2008 NETA Conference

By Erika Schulz

Myriam Siftar holds a master's degree from the European School of Management in Paris, an MBA from Drexel University, and a BS in Computer Science. She is the president and founder of MTM LinguaSoft, a mid-sized language services provider. During her career, Myriam has acquired a first-hand experience of the market for translation software, machine-translated outputs, and the future impact of translation software on the translation industry and its people.

Myriam Siftar began her presentation by providing an historical background for machine translation (MT), starting with Descartes' attempts to propose a universal language, and continuing up to present-day efforts. Toward the end of the 20th century, two major systems evolved: syntax-based MT, and corpus-based MT. Syntax-based (or rule-based) MT applies language rules and dictionaries to generate language pairs for translation. Corpus-based (or statistical) MT consists of a large collection of bilingual legacy material and uses pattern matching algorithms and statistics to create new translations.

A third generation of hybrid systems combines statistical with syntax-based MT in an attempt to increase accuracy from 40% to 70%. Currently, the goal is to achieve 90-95% accuracy in the target language when applying MT.

MT can be used in controlled environments, for large volumes of text, when human translation is impossible or real time translation is needed, for gisting, and for general dissemination.

MT is most commonly used by companies offering online customer support, by government, NGOs, organizations, press agencies interested in gisting documents, and language service providers helping specific customers. In other cases, MT provides an alternative to no translation at all, and the added value of information secrecy.

The final purpose of the target text will determine what kind of MT is a valid option for clients or end-users. The two possibilities are assisted or unassisted MT; in other words, MTs with or without the need for human post-editing.

On the one hand, MT promises reduced translation costs. On the other hand, there are still some quality and usability issues that need to be solved in order to meet the 95% accuracy goal.

But how will MT affect human translators? Theoretically, translators would be able to combine MT with translation memories (TMs), and improved alignment tools will also be available. Translations would be more time-efficient, allowing more time for specialization, and leading to higher productivity. Translators would also be working in a collaborative environment, sharing technologies and resources.

Questions posed by the attendees included, "Does this mean that MT will replace human translators?" We may not have an answer yet, but as translators, we should learn and understand the intricacies of these new trends in order to provide our clients with the best service possible, and the best of our knowledge.

*NETA Vice President Erika Schulz is a Spanish Editor and Project Manager.*

## A Day in the Life of a Federal Court Interpreter

A review of María Cecelia Marty's presentation at the 2008 Conference

by Jeremy Sachs

Through personal anecdotes, audience participation projects, and humor-laced stream-of-consciousness commentary, Ms. Marty literally took us along with her on a day in her life as a Spanish-language interpreter in Federal Court. It was, in fact, a 75-minute collage of the serious issues that all court interpreters face. Ms. Marty's presentation could aptly have been named, "Revisiting the Labors of Hercules". To wit:

We eagerly struggled with grammar skills ("hold a trial" becomes "celebrar un juicio", but this does not mean "to celebrate"), escaped the quicksand of stilted legalese ("summary judgment" = "no trial"), stood our ground before a rapid-fire judge (1000-words-a-minute Curtis), mangled the cadence of indispensable speaking agility exercises ("Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," while "Betty Botter had some butter" and "Pancha plancha con una plancha!"), tread water attempting to decode a handwritten letter from an illiterate defendant, fended off a stalker in the form of an inappropriate Interpreter's Oath (missing the phrase, "...to the best of our ability..."), escaped serious bodily harm (in video arraignment court), and undertook innumerable other challenges. All in all, a very satisfying adventure!

Ms. Marty used just the right combination of pedagogic, theatrical and Joycean skill sets to turn a highly technical subject into 75 minutes of empathetic and sympathetic give-and-take. In this writer's opinion, "A Day in the Life of a Federal Court Interpreter" was a highly effective professional development presentation.

*NETA member Jeremy Sachs translates from Spanish and Portuguese into English.*