

Less room for engagement

Researcher *Waltraud Kolb* on literature and machine translation

Could you describe the main focus of your research?

My research on machine translation is part of a larger ongoing research project regarding decision-making in literary translation. Why do we translate the way we do? Why and how is one word chosen over another, one style over another? How do decisions, processes, and routines involved in translating a literary work differ from the cognitive processes that go into post-editing a machine translation of a literary text? How does this impact the final target text?

What methods you use?

Traditionally, we look at published translations, prefaces or interviews by translators to study translation; but that kind of analysis comes “after the fact”, as George Steiner once famously said. Through my research, I aim to gain insight into the translation process as it happens, the translator’s (and post-editor’s) thinking, but also their actions when they work on auto-pilot. I asked five literary translators to translate an Ernest Hemingway short story from scratch and five different translators

to post-edit a machine-translated version (DeepL). To capture these processes for later analysis, they used keylogging software that unobtrusively registered keystrokes, pauses, edits, etc. At the same time, they talked aloud while working, voicing their thoughts and reflections, and this was audio-recorded. I have an enormous amount of data, keylogs and verbal records, and am currently analyzing it.

“High-quality post-editing is not much faster”

What gave you the idea for the topic of this research project?

Translators and publishers have started using machine translation, even if, more often than not, it is probably still in an experimental stage. Computer linguists and the machine translation community have also begun to pay attention to literary translation from



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Waltraud Kolb
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their own unique perspective, while it is still largely unexplored from a literary translation studies perspective.

Can you tell us something about your preliminary results?

One result, not surprising, is that high-quality post-editing is not much faster: even though Hemingway's story is simple and straightforward, the post-editors changed 90% of the sentences – the main problems the machine had were cohesion, reference, idioms, polysemy. Another preliminary finding is that the two groups seem to distribute their efforts differently. While the translators spent ample time on repetitions and ambiguity, stylistic features typical of Hemingway, the post-editors did so to a much lesser extent. This indicates that engagement with the source text/author differs between the two modes. With post-editing, there is an additional layer to deal with, much of the cognitive effort going into deciding what to do about the machine version, and this seems to leave less room for engagement with the source text/author.

How do you see the future of literary translation in relation to machine translation tools?

I expect to observe a shift away from translation to post-editing work in the medium term, with the key factor being time: will it be faster to translate a book or post-edit a machine version? This will be more relevant for some sectors of the book market than for others, but generally I anticipate increasing pressure from publishers to cut costs this way, even though post-editing may be as cognitively demanding and time-consuming as translation. And I am sure this will have all kinds of implications for copyright issues. The other issue at stake is quality, and the main risk I see is that post-editing will often not be done by translators. Is there also a long-term risk that, with the increasing use of machine translation, (literary) language will eventually become more uniform? Possibly.