

The future relationship of literary translation and AI

Reflections from CEATL president

Morten Visby

While it is certainly an interesting question how AI-based machine translation would fare in dealing with densely written, highly complex literature, particularly when translating between languages and cultures that are very far apart linguistically or historically, the more pressing concern for literary translators living and working today and tomorrow is the commercial viability of AI-based machine translation of contemporary genre literature, not least when the languages are closely related – e.g. the Nordic languages or the Romance languages. I am referring to the translation of crime, suspense and romance between linguistic domains that are closely related in time and culture. At this moment we need to look at the actual, real-life implications of AI-assisted machine translation for us as literary translators. And regarding that issue, I do have a couple of notes. Some of them are rather pessimistic. Others less so.

Getting real on people vs. machines

I believe that we underestimate the powers of AI at our own peril. Although

we might not like it, the fact is that machine translation of genre literature is actually quite good – meaning that it is not always obvious whether a human being or a machine have translated the text. And in this regard, it is important not to take free Google Translate services as an indication of the level of quality for AI translation. Also, due to the logic of ever-increasing processing power AI translation can only be expected to become even better. And we know from unpleasant experiences in other quarters of our professional field that publishers are, if not more than happy, then at least sometimes willing to accept less good, but workable solutions to translation. Particularly if these solutions hold promise of a cheaper and more streamlined production of translated literature, to the detriment of what would otherwise be considered fair, decent and sustainable in the long term.

So, let's get real on this topic. This is not the time to feel safe in the belief that the human brain will always, in the end, be superior to stupid machines. The issue of AI in literary translation

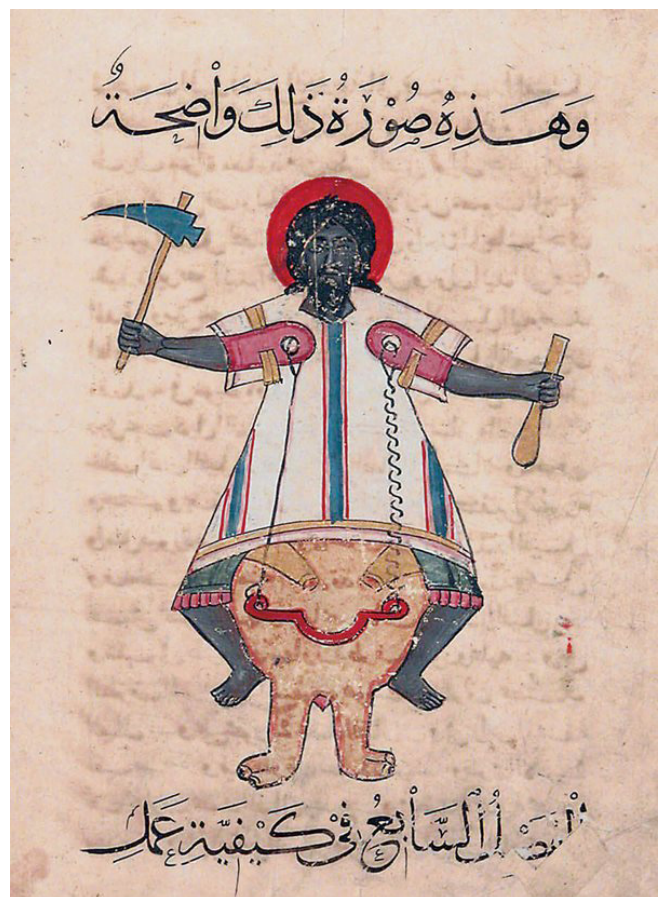
poses a whole range of challenges other than the logic of the human-machine interchangeability would suggest. But before that conversation becomes relevant, we need to look at a few other, more crude issues.

“This is not the time to feel safe in the belief that the human brain will always be superior to stupid machines”

Contemporary genre literature can be acceptably translated by machines. I am sorry, but it can. It is perfectly feasible that publishers would want to use machine translation of such works. It is faster and cheaper. The quality is good enough for the market, and a human editor would be needed anyway, because human translators also make mistakes. I have talked to publishers who admit that they would like to go down this route, and that they only elect not to, because they fear the damage it would do to their brand. That should tell us something about the very real danger of AI for us as professionals, but also something about the strong public perception of our cultural value as literary creators.

Recently (but before the COVID crisis), an independent consulting firm working

with AI, carried out an unpublished survey among European publishers, asking them if they would consider using machine translation if it could deliver acceptable quality. More than half of the publishers said that they would absolutely refuse to use machine translation no matter how appealing it was from a financial perspective, simply because they consider themselves part of a people industry and part of a cultural sector in which personal, human expression carries the utmost value and must be protected. I believe this self-understanding among European publishers is very strong



Al-Jazari elephant clock driver
Photo: Metropolitan Museum

and can be relied upon to slow down the implementation of AI-assisted translation considerably. But it would

be naïve to expect all publishers to feel this way. Likewise, it would be naïve to think that this sentiment could eventually stop the implementation of AI-assisted translation.

“Literary translators may find themselves in an even more precarious position than their current one”

Who owns the translation?

Another very important issue when it comes to AI and literary translation is, of course, the question of authors' rights. Whatever translation software can do, it is in various ways derived from a vast number of existing human translations. The value created by way of such software is based on the copyright protected work of our colleagues. Using copyright protected work – without paying for it – to develop machine translation that eventually will make human translators superfluous, doesn't exactly seem fair. And of course, when literary translators go from being authors of translated works of literature to freelance editors of AI-assisted translations, they may easily

find themselves in an even more precarious position than their current one: both without the labour market protection of employed workers and without the legal protection of their creative work as works of literature.

On a more positive note, there may also be benefits of AI for us as translators. More and more commissioning editors have only English as their second language, and we know that this helps create a very narrow outlook on which world literature is considered for translation. Improved AI-tools for translation might possibly be used by such editors to at least have a look at interesting books written in languages they do not speak themselves. These books, then, would not be translated by machines, but machines would make it possible to assess the commercial viability of buying the rights, finding the right kind of translator and maybe even begin advance marketing. All this could perhaps help diversify the publication of translated literature.



Morten Visby is a literary translator from English, Norwegian and German into Danish and former president of the Danish Translators' Association. He has worked in the political field of authors' rights and copyright for several years and is the current President of the Danish Authors' Society and President of the Board of CEATL.

*Morten Visby
Photo: Ildikó Lőrinszky*

The Committee on Culture and Education in the European Parliament addressed the problem of AI and literary translation in their 2020 **Opinion** on “intellectual property rights for the development of artificial intelligence technologies”. Among other things, they urge the Committee on Legal Affairs to note, when drawing up their motion for resolution on the issue, “that the question of the extent to which a work created by AI can be traced back to a human creator is of key importance”.

This evokes the fundamental question whether AI translation without any input of a human creator is possible at all. The importance of this question is affirmed by the committee when it “draws attention to the need to assess whether there is such a thing as an ‘original creation’ that does not require any human intervention.”