

SPECIAL FEATURE: AI AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

WRITERS ON AI AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

Musings on AI translation

Brandon Mull

Words are an imperfect means of communication. When creating a story, I experience a vivid spectacle in my mind – extraordinary people, grand adventures with weighty consequences, failure and triumph, heartache and humor – elements I must simplify and shrink down into a primitive code called the English language. I labor over my words with the desire to convey the maximum meaning with the limited options granted by my vocabulary. Despite my best efforts, every time a story moves from a vision in my mind to words on a page, fidelity to the original vision is lost.

Fiction is the study of the human heart and mind through the portrayal of characters navigating imagined scenarios. Although the pathways of the mind and the feelings of the heart are too complex to be effectively reduced to words, we strive to create an approximation of the subject matter, a serviceable illusion of life. Stephen King has said, “Fiction is the truth inside the lie.” Preserving the truth

embedded in fiction should be the primary goal of writing and translating. Poets and authors strive to wring more from words than their dry definitions strictly allow. Certain combinations and juxtapositions create a result that exceeds the sum of the parts. “She walks in beauty like the night,” conjures something special beyond the face value of the individual words.

A skilled writer pays attention to nuances of words, narrow shades of meaning, deft subtleties of expression, to convey a desired impression. An effective translator does not merely provide equivalent words in a new language – an effective translator seeks to convey the same impression in a new language. The required adjustments from the phrasing in the native language may be extreme, and rely on discerning insight and ingenuity from the translator. Inevitably, when a story is translated into a new language, additional fidelity from the original vision is lost. Only a human can make educated decisions on what can be lost in translation,





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what must be preserved, and what can and should be added in order to stay true to the author's intentions. I have found that the best large language models can simulate a reasonably competent writer, though the style and originality tend to be generic if not cliché. But let's imagine that in the future, programmers work out all the bugs, allowing AI to convincingly imitate human writers. Do we want the study of the human heart and mind carried out by trained machines?

A perceptive and talented human writer struggles to distill aspects of the human experience into words. Much is lost in the process. But how much more is lost when a computer program mimics the efforts of a human writer? Are we interested in lessons about humanity from a program with no human experiences? Could an AI program offer original and authentic insights? Can it do anything beyond spitting out remixes of the authentic perceptions and experiences of others, stitched together like Frankenstein's monster, having a semblance of animation with no actual life?

Good writing is largely about honesty. Since AI is not human, the best it can do is fake humanity. The ability to synthesize viewpoints and styles from a wide variety of sources makes even the best AI nothing more than an accomplished hack, a talented fraud.

As with writing, so with translation. I want a human translator working to preserve whatever value exists in my stories. My best hope for successfully bridging my work into another language lies in gifted translators using their best judgment to figure out how to preserve the impressions I am trying to convey. If we take the humanity out of the writing and sharing of stories, we lose most of what stories have to offer. As a matter of principle, we should demand thinking, feeling humans as the custodians of truth inside of fiction.