



La Frontera Language Services

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Why hire a human being when computers are so much cheaper?



These days you can buy translation software that runs on your personal computer. Even easier, you can use free translators on the internet. These programs use the power of the modern computer chip. Early programs developed during the Cold War looked up each word or phrase, and substituted an equivalent word in the target language. Newer programs use algorithms to incorporate grammatical rules. These programs can make sense of sentences like the well-known joke told by Groucho Marx: "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know."

The next generation of translation programs used probability. After evaluating thousands of documents, the computer determines how often word A will be followed by word B. The challenge now is to replicate how people think. In February 2011 a computer defeated two humans on the game show Jeopardy, but a few weeks later the computer was defeated by New Jersey Congressman Rush Holt. An example of human thought processes too indefinable for the computer was the category "Presidential Rhyme Time," in which the correct response to "Herbert's military strategy" was "Hoover's maneuvers."

Computer translation programs work well for certain projects—for example for translating foreign e-mails or news articles. In these situations it is not necessary to have a perfectly grammatical and clear translation because the reader will be able to make sense of strange phrasing. An example of a machine translation (using Babelfish, available for free, online) is the following article from the Mexican business newspaper *El Financiero* (March 7, 2011). The article, originally in Spanish, was about the increase in petroleum prices. The English version reads:

The petroleum barrel Brent type of the North Sea for deliveries in April quoted in 116.03 dollars at the beginning of the session of today (08:00 GMT) in the electronic market Intercontinental Petroleum Exchange (IT HOISTS). The Brent gained 1,24 dollars (1,07 percent) with respect to the closing of Thursday. In as much, the crude estadounidense West Texas Intermediate (WTI) for deliveries in April, also 08:00 GMT, raised to 90 cents of dollar (0,88 percent) and it quoted in 102.80 dollars by barrel. On the other hand, the basket of the Organization of Exporting Petroleum Countries (OPEC) quoted Thursday in 110.48 dollars, which represented a fall of 36 cents of dollar (0,33 percent) with respect to the closing of Wednesday, the cartel informed. (With information of Agencias/APB).

The informed reader in the oil business will get all the information he or she wants to know.

On the other hand, Infiniti auto makers may not make the desired impression on potential buyers with this translation from the same news source:

As of autumn, the automotive mark Japanese Infiniti will begin the sale of automobiles of luxury in Mexico like sedán sport G37 and its version coupé; the one of luxury of high performance Infiniti M56; crossover sport FX50 and the SUV of luxury of complete size QX56. It informed that it will have five distributors established in the City of Mexico, Guadalajara and Monterrey, where they will be possible to be acquired and to be received service the Infiniti automobiles.

Can a computer translator do the job for you?