Improve your translations with AI

Machine interpreting

- All too common mistakes
- Incoherent
- even incomprehensible

final text

Conclusion

Need of control procedures

Does it save time?

Common mistakes

- Language detection
- Articulations — sentence parts
- Predictive model

Does not understand the context

- Using a glossary

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Language detection

Take the verb “argumenter”, for example. DeepL consistently interprets this verb as a Norwegian noun in the plural. Whereas, to me, it is the French verb in the infinitive form. The translation varies only slightly: “arguments” instead of “argumenter”. But this distorts the meaning of the sentence.

sentence parts

When I translate articles from our blog into other languages, the sentences are split into ‘strings’. A sentence may be split into several strings, particularly if it contains a hyperlink. In this case, because it is a linguistic model, it cannot align the strings with one another. They are treated as sequences of signals that are independent of one another. For example, I recently translated an article on the ABC Learning Design method. At one point, a string appears that ends in French with ‘je vous ai présenté la’. The following string begins with the word ‘méthode’. In Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, ‘méthode’ is masculine (metodo). The string “je vous ai présenté la” becomes “vi ho presentato la” in Italian, but is followed by “metodo”, which is masculine. This means I have to correct every string containing the feminine articles and the masculine noun. It’s not a major issue, but it would undermine our credibility with Italian, Spanish and Portuguese readers.

Predictive model

Large language models are probabilistic systems. When they encounter a string of characters, they estimate the probability of what comes next. For example, in a sentence such as “the French population in”, the model will calculate that there is a 90 per cent chance that the next word will be “general”. In some character strings, the probability is so high that the model adds the word “general” of its own accord. However, as my context is academic and professional, the next word is likely to be different. But if I don’t proofread this text, I’ll end up with an Italian or Portuguese translation containing the word “général”, even though it does not appear in the original sentence and has no meaning or function in the intended translation.

Does not understand the context

A single word can have several meanings, depending on the context. For example, I use the word ‘qualification’ in a professional context. It therefore means ‘aptitude, a set of skills related to a trade or profession’. But DeepL systematically translates ‘qualification’ as ‘selection’ because, in the world of sport, this word means ‘to be ranked or selected’. Fortunately, there is a feature that allows you to ‘lock in’ the desired type of translation. However, this example, like others, clearly shows that translations must constantly be proofread and checked. Even though it saves time, this does not mean that they should not be reviewed by a person. This is why European legislation on AI transparency exempts content reviewed by a human from the labelling requirements applicable to content generated by generative AI.

Using a glossary

Both DeepL and Translate Press have a feature that allows you to force the software to translate a word in a specific way. This is the ‘glossary’. It is a sort of dictionary or thesaurus containing a list of words and their designated translations. For example, when we created the Dys MOOC, we explained in the first part of the course that learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, dysphasia, etc., were difficulties arising from brain development, but not illnesses. However, on several occasions, the software translated ‘disorders’ as ‘illnesses’. Participants in the MOOC quickly brought this to our attention. Using the ‘glossary’ feature, we were able to review all the translations, ensuring that this error would not happen again.

Conclusion

The errors highlighted above are not a major problem in themselves. However, they do emphasise the fact that any content generated by generative artificial intelligence should be reviewed by a human. And that, when you translate a text into another language using AI, it is best to have a basic understanding of that language and how it works. Otherwise, you risk losing all credibility with your audience.

Machine interpreting

YouTube has recently introduced an automated instant translation feature based on a large language model (LLM). The results are often hilarious. Words are mistranslated, or even completely made up by the model. So much so that the original video becomes virtually incomprehensible. Let’s hope that international organisations don’t adopt this sort of system to resolve conflicts between states…

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