Session title: Why are we (still) waiting? What premium translators need to use MT effectively

Presenters: Robin Bonthrone (Fry & Bonthrone Partnerschaft, Mainz, Germany) and Konstantin Lakshin (Russian Link LLC, Golden/CO)

Abstract:

This presentation is given by two very experienced professional translators with wide-ranging knowledge of and expertise in the potential benefits that can be obtained from using MT, as well as the practical constraints. They examine the reasons for the continued gap between what MT developers offer premium translators and the solutions that translators expect. They then examine some of the technical issues and propose a list of requirements that MT developers need to meet so that premium translators can deploy MT systems effectively and productively as a key component of a holistic expert environment that combines state-of-the-art translation support tools with the unique expertise of professional human translators. As such, the presentation combines both a strategic business case review and a more bottom-up analysis of specific technical requirements.

The past decade has seen the emergence of a split in the translation industry between the high-volume mass-market business on the one hand, and the high-end premium segment on the other, although it is rarely possible to identify a point where one stops and the other begins. It certainly appears to be the case that the mass translation market has successfully attracted much of the attention (and investment) of MT vendors up to now, whereas there is little evidence of any consistent approach to reflecting the MT-related needs of premium translators and their (equally premium) clients. A key question to be addressed is therefore whether the fact that the premium segment has often been ignored to such an extent by MT vendors is because they are actually unaware of its existence, its structures, and/or its requirements. Among other things, this presentation seeks to remedy this deficit by outlining the defining characteristics of the premium segment (or rather, segments) and what distinguishes it (them) from the more familiar mass-market, high-volume translation business.

Many premium translators working today are highly tech-savvy when it comes to a broad spectrum of translation technologies. They readily embrace state-of-the-art translation memory and terminology management suites, for example, and appreciate (and indeed demand) the tangible and sustainable productivity gains they can now leverage from the intelligent, integrated deployment of these and other systems.

They are in many cases convinced that integrating advanced MT solutions with their existing translation tools would enable them to achieve considerably greater productivity gains and economic benefits. These would not only offer sustainable solutions for the translation industry as a whole, but would also provide MT developers with a rewarding new market channel for their products. However, a number of often serious constraints—including data security, system size and scalability, interoperability, integration at both a technical and a workflow level, MT vendor longevity, and ROI—appear to come together to prevent them from doing so in practice.

Many translators active in the premium segment have—or have access to—the knowledge and skills needed to address at least some of these constraints, but they still face considerable hurdles when it comes to integrating best-of-breed MT into their workflows efficiently, or even to experimenting with it, as the existing MT HMI largely ignores the needs of professional premium translation providers. As a result, considerable potential is left unused, to the detriment of both premium translators and MT developers.

Before addressing the technical issues that need to be resolved to enable seamless interaction between premium translators and MT, there is a need to emphasize that, in most cases, specialist translation as a professional activity relies to a critical extent on various forms of knowledge—from general or language-related to domain-specific—that is not readily available or accessible in machine-readable form for use by MT. In many cases, however, translators are in a position to add some representation of such knowledge to actual source texts and training corpora for use in, for example, factored or class-based SMT models or for fine-tuning RBMT behaviors.

Moving toward such a level of integration without setting unrealistic goals would be beneficial for both translators—who would be a step closer to obtaining usable MT—and MT developers—who would gain an additional market channel that would also allow them to explore potential improvements to their systems with direct backing from the users.

To start this process, we need to rethink the concepts and architectures of user interaction with both frontend and backend resources that are already part of at least some MT systems. For the frontend, this includes such things as interactive and selective application of MT from within the traditional translation memory tools, as well as tighter integration with grammar checkers and QA tools. For the backend, it implies a relatively straightforward interface/toolset for restructuring the existing data and adding the metadata and, in many cases, direct access to engines and model settings, so that translators have the option of venturing into the uncharted waters of personalized small-scale MT systems at their own risk, or of commissioning MT experts.

The presenters expect that the facts and arguments highlighted in this presentation will contribute to a greater understanding of the needs of premium translators, as well as the opportunities for MT vendors that this segment offers. Equally, there is a hope that the conversation between the two sides that emerges from the presentation will deepen the dialog and accelerate the cooperation between translators and MT developers that will, ultimately, help to shape market-ready translation support ecosystems for premium translators that incorporate premium MT capabilities.