Teletranslation

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INTRODUCTION

Translation as a form of language mediation is called upon to convert the source text written in one natural language into the target text in another, to assimilate or disseminate information across language barriers. Prior to the ubiquitous availability of the Internet, translators worked without the benefit of fast and affordable online access to up-to-date information in a wide variety of languages or to fellow translators in different geographical locations to share knowledge. Translation texts were largely in printed form and their circulation was dependent on physical delivery systems. In response to the widespread use of information and communication technology (ICT) leading to the advent of the Internet, the concept of teletranslation was first proposed (O'Hagan, 1996) to demarcate an emerging translation paradigm based on electronic networks of global communication rather than one where physical transportation was the main means for moving texts. It represented the new modus operandi where translators, which may include machine translation (MT), and customers are electronically linked with online access to translation tools and to other translators for knowledge sharing. It presupposes the translation text to be in electronic form and thus able to be seamlessly transmitted, stored, and processed by electronic means. Today, teletranslation has been embodied in Web-based platforms on the Internet, allowing the translator not only to receive and transmit translation text, but also to procure translation jobs, conduct research as well as collaborate in teams. Furthermore, an increasing array of computer applications has made computer-aided translation (CAT) commonplace (Quah, 2006) where technology is indispensable for the production of translation. On the basis of the infrastructure supported by ICT networks as well as the prevailing use of CAT, teletranslation continues to develop as the predominant paradigm in the translation industry.

The term translation embraces different modes of language mediation. According to the strict use of the terminology, however, "translating" refers to the act of mediating communication in written form, which typically takes place asynchronously whereas "interpreting" facilitates oral communication in synchronous mode as in conference interpreting. So far, the impact of ICT has been far more prominent in translation than in interpretation where text-processing tools play a limited role in oral communication and face-to-face mode prevails with little dependence on electronic means, with a few exceptions of remote interpreting modes. These language mediation modes serve to facilitate a given communicative situation where the sender and the receiver of the message do not share a common language, therefore requiring the source language to be converted into the target language in a required form. The language mediator plays the unique role of simultaneously being the receiver of the source text and the sender of the target text where translating or interpreting forms an act of communication embedded in another act of communication (Hatim & Mason, 1997, pp. 1–2). This fundamental role played by the language mediator remains the same in teletranslation. This article provides the background to the emergence of teletranslation, its current status, and future prospects with reference to relevant research and developments in related fields.

BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION FROM TRANSLATION TO TELETRANSLATION

Prior to the 1980s, physical transportation systems underpinned the translation business by facilitating the movement of text between translator, customer, and often translation agency acting as an intermediary. As such, translation services were constrained by physical distance, thus operating primarily as a regional business. The arrival of fax machines allowed them to become less location-bound. The nature of translation work primarily being text-based and asynchronous (i.e., translation usually does not have to be done instantaneously) suited telework mode in which translators receive and return text at a distance with a time lag. Fax

machines facilitated telework by allowing translators to work on text remotely without incurring additional delivery delays. During the 1980s and into the early 1990s, text transmission via fax was gradually replaced by use of modems with text transmitted directly from computer to computer. This provided the advantage of text arriving in machine-readable form with flexibility for further processing by computer. Into the 1990s, the power of computer networks began to see translation businesses operate internationally, linking translators and customers worldwide.

In the mid-1990s, the Internet started to be used for information gathering and for communicating via text and subsequently also voice with VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) modes on the Internet such as e-mail and electronic forums provided the translators with efficient means to communicate and share specialist knowledge as well as to receive and transmit translation text. The Internet made physical national borders porous, allowing multilingual information to be available to the advantage of translators seeking information in a variety of languages. At the same time, the very nature of the Internet boosted demand for translation, for example, where a user happened upon a foreign language Web site and required a translation there and then, preferably at little or no cost.

Tapping into such needs, services based on online MT became commonly available whereby translating Web sites on the fly via user-friendly interfaces; the user simply pastes the URL or portions of the text to be translated in a translate-box, selects the source and the target languages, and presses a translate button to generate the translation. The online MT *Babelfish* was introduced in 1997 on the Alta Vista portal reportedly handling four million Web pages with 16 language combinations every day by 2001 (McKinsey, 2001, p. 38). MT found a niche market in providing fast online translation, mostly free of charge, introducing the utility which came to be referred to as "information gisting." Clearly, unsuitable as a human translation (HT) based service in view of pricing, time-frame, and logistics, MT has met new demands for multilingual language mediation to be provided instantaneously in the user's online environment at virtually no cost to the user. These automatic online translation services operating on the basis of a seamless electronic link between the user, the service provider, and the translation text can be viewed as a manifestation of teletranslation. Convenient and free MT services notwithstanding, businesses which leverage the Internet to reach customers on a global basis needed to transmit accurate information in the customer's language rather than relying on the ad hoc application of gisting services by the users themselves. This resulted in demand for Web sites to be available in different languages suitable for different markets and led to a new type of language service called Web localization which became the fastest growing area within the translation sector in the late 1990s (Lockwood, 1999).

ASSOCIATED DEVELOPMENTS OF LOCALIZATION

The impact of ICT on translation was also evidenced in the introduction of new types of product to be translated, in some cases, driving a new mode of language mediation; a case in point is the practice called localization which emerged in the early 1980s. The localization industry came into existence to meet the demands of the opening international market for computer products (Esselink, 2000); software and hardware needed to be adapted to the requirements of local customers in diverse markets, representing different languages and cultural conventions from those of the original market. In addition to translation in print form such as manuals and packaging, software products also require the translation of online help as well as the body of software. Localization may also affect nontextual elements such as images, icons, layout, colors, and so forth, which can be culture-specific, thus needing to be modified to suit the target market. Software localization involves software engineering to integrate various translated elements into the body of the software, followed by testing to ensure functionality in the localized version. In this way, although translation is an essential part of localization, the latter has a wider scope than translation. During the 1990s, the localization sector expanded from mainly dealing with computer software to accommodating a diverse range of products such as Web sites, mobile phones, video games, and other electronic devices. It is now recognized as a key sector in the translation industry and has been incorporated into many university translation courses (Folaron, 2006) with a number of translation studies scholars attempting to theorize this newer form of language mediation (e.g., Pym, 2004).