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Now Computer Translator

- Susan Okula

WESTPORT (Connecticut), (AP): It has been a technological dream for years: a machine that turns out accurate, grammar-perfect translations from one language to another. Engineers on many continents have tried to create such a machine. So far, none has been able to completely replace a human translator.

A young U.S. company, however, is actively marketing the next best thing: A semi-automatic translation system, based on a computer, with a human adding the finishing touches.

"Our approach is interactive—the machine and the translator work together", says Ron Mahoney, President of the three-year-old firm, Automated Language Processing Systems (ALPS). The computer automatically translates much of the text, but recognises and indicates to a translator phrases or words that could present problems. The translator then selects or types in the proper words.

Currently ALPS is offering systems that translate English to French, German, Spanish and Italian and a system that translates French to English.

Traditionally, computers have had a tough time handling the nuances of language.

For example, a French-to-English translation could get hung up on the French verb 'Dejeuner'. The word as a verb, means 'to eat lunch', but there is no one-word English equivalent. It can also be a noun meaning 'lunch', it means 'breakfast'.

Similarly the English word 'free' has at least two translations into French—"gratuit," if the word means 'free of charge' or 'libre' if it means politically free. Jack Rapport, the regional manager of ALPS for the northeast United States, cites another potential problem for a machine—words mean different things in different contexts.

He says the English phrase 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'—meaning a person wants to do something but is unable physically to do so—could be translated by a machine as 'the wine is good but the meat is rotten'.

Partly for these reasons, computer translation so far has usually been used for straightforward, technical material. The U.S. government has used machine translation to translate foreign technical publica-

tions; the Japanese firm Hitachi announced in 1982 that it had developed an English-to-Japanese translation system useful initially only for technical translations.

In Luxembourg, the European Community has experimented with machine translation for economic and governmental texts. Mahoney and Rapport, in interviews here, emphasised that their systems were directed toward lengthy translation jobs; they cited as an example the translation of a personal computer manual several hundred pages long.

The ALPS product is based on years of research at Brigham Young University in the U.S. state of Utah. Professors there were working to translate the book of Mormon, the fundamental religious text of the Mormon religion.

ALPS, based in Provo, Utah, is stepping up the marketing campaign for its product, and has sold systems to companies including Xerox and ComputerVision, a company that specialises in computer-aided manufacturing and design.

Mahoney, a former Vice-President with Texas Instruments, the large U.S. electronics company, said he believes the \$3 billion dollar world-wide market

for translation services will grow in coming years by 5 per cent to 10 per cent annually.

John Rasor, a spokesman for Xerox Corp. in Webster New York, confirmed that his company had bought ALPS equipment after a careful comparison of other computer-aided translation systems on the market. He refused to comment on how the system has worked, saying the only that Xerox was using the equipment for a project it doesn't want to discuss publicly.

Jesse Kalfel, manager of documentation for the Bedford, Massachusetts-based Computervision, said his company decided to go with computer-aided translation because it believed it would be more cost-effective and faster. The ALPS equipment is being used to translate a 12,000-page document into French, he said. Kalfel said it was too early to evaluate how the system was performing. One translator, who works for a New Jersey research company but also did not want to be identified, said he tried the ALPS computer and thought it could be useful to some in her field.

But she noted, "for my use it doesn't do anything I can't do so much faster and better."

[Courtesy: Emirates News]