

In the AI era, is translation already dead?

*Note: These are Jeffrey Ding's informal and unofficial translations -- all credit for the original goes to the authors and the original text linked below. These are informal translations and all credit for the original work goes to the authors. Others are welcome to share **excerpts** from these translations as long as my original translation is cited. Commenters should be aware that the Google Doc is also publicly shareable by link. These translations are part of the ChinAI newsletter - weekly-updated library of translations from Chinese thinkers on AI-related issues: <https://chinai.substack.com/>*

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Anne: Only by understanding the particular characteristics of AI translation and having considerable connoisseurship and acuity in the content areas it translates can we make better use of it instead of being misled by it. In the end, humans must continue to learn and maintain creativity – only then can they be the keeper of machines.

2023 can be called the "first year of AI". The emergence of a number of AI tools such as ChatGPT has made many people cheer, but it has also come with worries of another group of people. Some cheer because these tools will help many people achieve significant improvements in efficiency while reducing costs. In the past, it took hours to write and draw, but now with AI, you can instantly generate graphics and text that can be directly used with just a few instructions. Some worry because the skills that many people rely on for a living are about to be easily crushed by AI, and unemployment is inevitable.

One profession that many people are bearish on is translation. It's not just been a year or two that this profession has been bad-mouthed. When Google Translate was born in the early 21st century, many people enthusiastically imagined the bright future of machines replacing human translation. But at that time, Google Translate could only translate President as 总统, and did not understand that sometimes it should be translated as 主席 "chairman", 总裁 "chief executive" or 校长 "principal". Therefore, for human professional translators at that time, it was like the tortoise and the hare in the early stages of the race. Tortoises pose no threat to rabbits.

In fact, translation is a profession that has been misunderstood by Chinese people for a long time. To a large extent, the characters for "translation" [翻译] can be blamed for the misunderstanding it gives people - it easily makes people think that Chinese and foreign languages are two sides of a piece of paper, and "turning them over" [翻过去] produces a

completely corresponding side. On the other hand, many people think that translation is as simple as setting up a ladder on a low wall and climbing over it. As everyone knows, languages are not created equal. Many things and concepts are unique to different cultures, and there is no equivalent in other cultures. Building a ladder between widely different languages, such as Chinese and English, is sometimes as difficult as a doctor building a bridge in a patient's heart.

It is said that the Eskimos have more than 400 words to describe snow. How can they be accurately translated into the tribal languages spoken near the equator? 红茶 (the characters for red and tea) in Chinese is "black tea" in English. If the British named the tea after the color of the tea brick before steeping rather than the color of the tea in hot water, this name change is quite understandable. However, the Italians' "color-blind naming" is very difficult to explain: "Egg Yolk" in Italian literally means "red egg" (rosso d'uovo), but almost everyone around the world agrees that the middle part of the egg is yellow, or orange at most.

In all of these, there is very little rationality in explaining the differences between different languages, and there may not be any rules to follow. The translator must have the nimbleness of a magician, quietly switching between various "colors", or beginning to interpret and explain. The two words for "翻译" in English — translate and interpret — reveal these two properties of translation work: the word "translate" comes from Latin, and its original meaning is "to cross" or "to convert one thing into a new form or state." The word "interpret" involves explanation, as many times the job of translation is to use the target language to interpret unfamiliar concepts in the source language.

*****Did not translate 4 paragraphs about the difference between Chinese (which the author calls a "poetic" language) vs. English (a "prose" language). Examples that flesh out this difference: English haiku always sounds longer than Japanese or Chinese haiku; English has more restrictions on the singular/plural forms of nouns and verb conjugation (tenses), whereas there is more ambiguity in Chinese language.**

Translation is such a complex task that early machine translation works were clumsy and unreliable like academic papers written by elementary school students. Today, AI translation has made great progress through being trained on massive corpora and deep learning. In fact, before ChatGPT was launched, I noticed that the level of Google Translate had improved to the level of high school students and even average college students. Resolving polysemy (words that have multiple meanings) is no longer a big problem, and the translation looks much smoother. After more than ten years of development, in the race against human translators, AI translators have grown "hot wheels" under their feet. But it's far from perfect. It is said that translation is a "遗憾的艺术" (the art of disappointment). This is true for human translation, and even more so for AI.

I started using Google Translate as my "assistant" around 2021. I will start by letting it translate a first draft, and then I will proofread it, which can help me increase my efficiency by two to three times. But this method is only suitable for non-fiction articles exemplified by business or technical documents. This type of article has a simple sentence structure, straightforward

language, and is relatively easy to follow standard patterns" - this is also in line with the characteristics of the positions that experts predict will be the first to be replaced by AI, that is, work that does not require high professional knowledge and creativity, and can be produced in a standard mode, such as the writing of template articles such as general reports and media announcements, as well as customer service, data analysis, and ordinary customized programming, etc.

When it comes to content that is complex or has subtle connotations, AI translation will still be incoherent or full of errors. In terms of translation quality alone, ChatGPT is not superior to Google Translate, and its translations are often very rough. However, it can bring about human-computer interactions and can — by following specific human instructions — adjust the translation, improve the quality, or meet certain special requirements for the language style of the translation.

I used to call my sister to discuss things when I was working as a translator. She studies Chinese linguistics. Sometimes I understand the meaning of a piece of English, but I can't think of an authentic Chinese expression. I would explain to her what I need to express, and she would give me some inspiration. Now ChatGPT can well assume the role of this linguist consultant and can be on call anytime and anywhere. But does this mean that with AI translation, humans can achieve near-costless "freedom of translation"? My answer is: "It's not that simple."

Let me start with two examples from my personal experience. A few months ago I shared my knowledge on social media about the impact of bilingual environments on young children's language development. I have participated in training in this area, so I know very well that there is a long-standing misconception that a bilingual environment will cause delayed language development in young children. At the end of the last century, this view had already been refuted by scientific research.

A netizen who claims to be studying for a master's degree in education in the United States insisted that a bilingual environment will make children learn to speak later. I asked her to provide authoritative evidence, and she searched for a long time and posted a screenshot, which was an abstract of an academic paper. The first sentence was: "There was limited evidence to suggest that bilingual children develop speech at a slower rate than their monolingual peers". She interpreted this sentence in Chinese as: "Although there is not much evidence, there is indeed evidence that bilingual children develop slower than monolingual children."

I immediately saw the crux of the problem. I poked fun at her, did she use Google Translate to read the literature? Later, I entered this sentence into Google Translate and then ChatGPT. The translation that came out was indeed the same as the netizen's interpretation, which was "there was evidence (with some limits) that bilingual children develop slower than their monolingual peers." Just look at it. In this translation, it seems correct to literally translate "limited evidence" as "evidence with some limits", and the translation is also smooth. However, in an academic

context, "limited evidence" does not simply mean that the amount of evidence is small, but that the amount and reliability of the evidence are so limited that it is not enough to support a certain conclusion. When I asked ChatGPT what the phrase meant in English, it could clearly explain it as above. But when asked to translate this sentence again, it still gave the previous translation. It doesn't know that the perception Chinese readers get from this translation will be very different from the original English meaning.

Another time I was doing poetry transcreation. I wanted to translate an English poem into an ancient Chinese poem (format), but I really couldn't think of a suitable word for a sentence, so I asked ChatGPT for help, asking it to tell me what words meant repetition/imitation and that rhymed with the word "印 [yin4]". It listed 6 words for me, 复制、仿制, etc., none of which rhymed with "yin4". I also emphasized that I needed a phrase whose last character had the final rhyme "in" and which meant imitation or repetition. It again gave me a list of 7 words that either rhymed but had the wrong meaning, or had the same meaning but didn't rhyme. Finally I rearranged the rhyme (scheme) of the entire paragraph and completed the entire poem on my own.

During this process, I also tried to let ChatGPT directly translate English into Chinese classical poetry. However, its translation was not only mixed with particularly colloquial words, but after I repeatedly emphasized that each sentence must be five characters, its outputted translation will have one or two sentences with four or six characters. I feel that ChatGPT has a better understanding of English. Its Chinese fluency level is not as good as English in terms of comprehension and character outputs. It is said that this is due to the relatively small amount of high-quality Chinese corpus used to train AI.

After reading this, readers most probably now understand the limitations of AI translation. If human translators are chefs, then AI translators are like a super combination of McDonald's plus pre-made dishes and cooking machines. McDonald's can provide diners with convenient, hygienic, and affordable food. Many people, especially children, also like the taste of its food. If you are in a rush for time and don't have high requirements for the color, aroma and nutrition of food, McDonald's is a good choice. But it would be much too naive to think that because there is McDonald's, other restaurants will close, or that with pre-made dishes and cooking machines, chefs all over the world will lose their jobs.

The squeeze faced by the translation industry from AI is actually no different from that faced by various industries such as media, finance, engineering technology, and even medical care. Since last year, many high-tech companies in Silicon Valley, including Google, have laid off thousands of engineering and technical personnel, so much so that some people joked that "coders killed coders." Those coders who have been "f'ed over", like the translators replaced by AI, are mostly engaged in basic technical work, in which the working mode and content can be standardized.

Like other industries, the translation industry will become very "卷" under the squeeze of AI. Excellent human translators, like chefs at Michelin three-star restaurants, will become "luxury

service" providers, serving only those customers who have very high requirements for translation quality. Newcomers or people with average skills who have just entered this industry are faced with two choices: either work hard to reach the top and join the high-end market; or they can combine translation with other skills and use their creativity to explore new areas, such as specifically writing prompt words that allow AI to adjust/improve the translation, or use AI to write simple bilingual materials.

Users of AI translation (including human translators themselves) should treat AI translation works with caution. AI, like all tools, has advantages and disadvantages. As humans, we don't need to compete with AI translation in terms of speed and quantity (of course we can't compete with it), but we don't have to be superstitious about it either. Only by understanding the particular characteristics of AI translation and having considerable connoisseurship and acuity in the content areas it translates can we make better use of it instead of being misled by it. In the end, humans must continue to learn and maintain creativity – only then can they be the keeper of machines. Otherwise, you may be suffering from it without even realizing it.

Finally, I would like to end this article with a quote from Ernst & Young executive Jonathan Sears. This sentence comes from an article he published in *Economist Impact*, a subsidiary of *The Economist*, in October last year. He said, "The more sustainable value of technology adoption doesn't come from what the technology does, but what the user can do with it."