

Could You Translate This Site for Me?

Rating the Usefulness of Translation Software Programs for Law Library Web sites

by Roy Balleste

When I think about the future of information retrieval, I can't avoid wondering about what will it bring. Tom Clancy's novel *Net Force* captures the idea of a future highly influenced by the World Wide Web. It is a world where access to the right information becomes a high commodity. In his novel, Clancy presented the classic struggle of good against evil, as the FBI's elite Net Force unit protected citizens from the abuses of powerful individuals who used the Internet for illegal activities.

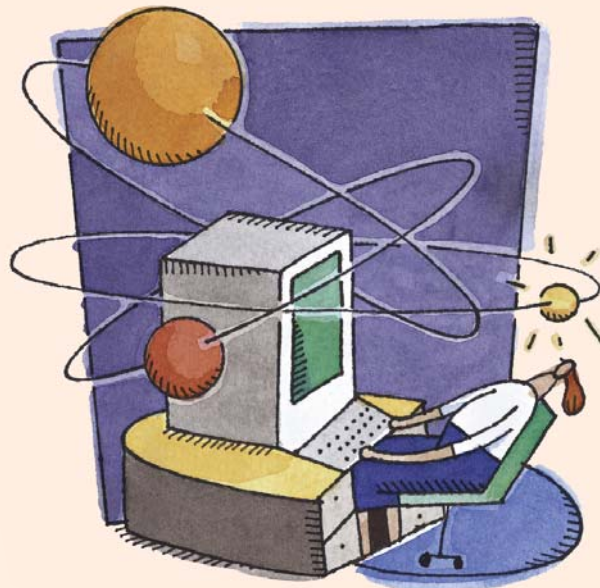
Against this background, we should wonder where will the library profession be 50 years from now? The librarians' elusive future is not necessarily uncertain. I am convinced that law librarians will continue to be at the forefront of legal research. In today's legal environment, geographical boundaries have faded away and the Internet has bridged the distance. The Internet future promises to make any remaining barriers of communication almost, if not completely, nonexistent. Along with these considerations, we should remember that reference services, especially good customer service, are one of the most important missions of any law library. Many libraries are venturing into electronic means of providing reference services, and patrons are using these electronic services more and more.

The information that law libraries provide in Web pages is accessed by many around the world, but not all patrons are necessarily proficient in the English language. The 21st century promises to be an age of globalization and those who are willing to expand their horizons will receive the fruits of an accessible market. What happens if a law student from the University of Paris III (La Sorbonne-Nouvelle) decides to research a Web site at one of our universities? What if the student happens to be from Universidad Central de Venezuela? Assume that these students are not fluent in English. What if the librarians want to obtain information from a Web page written in Portuguese? In all these situations, law librarians should consider the role of a *machine-based* translation software program to ease information retrieval efforts.

This article will be limited to the do-it-yourself bi-directional translation services. These services are an easy and cost-efficient way to allow Internet users to translate Web pages into their native languages and for a librarian to translate somebody else's Web page. It is important to me, for example, to be able to translate a Web site maintained in Chile. But it is just as important that a Chilean be able to translate my Web site from the comfort of her home in Santiago.

Translation software programs are a great tool to enhance a library's Web page. With a click of a button, users can translate the main text of a site into their native languages. Technology giants, such as Altavista, Microsoft, America Online, CompuServe and Oracle, are already using translator programs to ease the Web surfing needs of their customers. Several companies offer translation software programs, some with better results than others. Some are free of charge; others are expensive.

My research included what I considered the most relevant programs. I rated these programs on a scale of one to five stars, based on price and convenience to the users. But most of all, I rated them based on quality of translation. All these programs work on the basis of language pairs — for example, English to Spanish, English to French, etc. Contact the vendor to find out what pairs it offers. Web addresses are provided for the programs discussed in this article. They are available in the market and provide translation of the most common and widely used languages. As with all technology, the future promises more and better results. Before I discuss in detail what I considered the best program, I will briefly mention and rate four other programs. Because I am bilingual in English and Spanish, I performed my tests using these two languages whenever possible.



My rating scheme follows:

- *Poor
- **Fair
- ***OK
- ****Excellent
- *****Outstanding

During my analysis of the programs, I realized that none deserved a poor or fair rating because all the evaluated programs offered an acceptable degree of functionality.

Lernout & Hauspie™ ***

Lernout & Hauspie provides the opportunity to test its product online by translating Web pages — after it obtains some information from the prospective user. Unfortunately, it does not provide any freeware. I was pleased with the online demonstration. However, the products are not free. Why pay \$149 for its product if a competitor's is available as freeware? Furthermore, the software translation capabilities are unidirectional: The program allows one to translate Web pages onsite, but a visitor from across the globe will not be able to translate someone else's page. If a library wants its visitor to be able to translate its site, that library must first translate its own pages using

L&H's software — creating multiple Web pages of its library site in different languages — and then provide a link for its visitors to those translated pages. The visitor will not see an instantly translated site, but one that was previously translated. This is unnecessary extra work, given the fact that other programs provide more options served on a silver platter. Well, almost as good. This company offers several products, but the one relevant to this article is the Power Translator Pro 77. For more information, visit the Web site at <http://www.lhsl.com/mt>.

LanguageForce® ***

The relevant product from Language Force is the Universal Translator 2000®, a program powered by LanguageForce's own "omni-directional translation" technology. The software allows translation from one language to another language, without relying on English as the intermediate language. This is a great tool, but there is a price attached to this amenity: \$149. The company does not provide a way to test the product online. And similar to Lernout & Hauspie's program, the software translation capabilities are unidirectional. For more information, visit the LanguageForce Web site at <http://www.languageforce.com>.

Translation Experts Ltd. ***

Translation Experts offers InterTran™. TE allows a test drive of the product online. First, the user links free of charge to TE's site at <http://www.tranexp.com/intertran/> linking. After that, it is a matter of locating a pull-down window on TE's Web site and typing in the address of the Web page to be translated. TE promises "a much better level of performance" to those who pay to subscribe to its site for translation of their Web pages. The package cost is \$10 for up to 50,000 words per month. A second package allows unlimited access to the service for \$100 dollars a month. TE also allows those with their own Web pages the option of running InterTran on their own servers. This option costs \$1,000 per year. Once the translation of a Web page is completed, TE offers a word-by-word alternative translation. For example, there are several possible translations for the English word *boat* — e.g., *barco*, *embarcacion*, *lancha*. In this case, the software allows the user to choose the desired word. There is a problem with this: How does the user know which word to pick? The purpose behind translation

software is for the program to choose the words for users. Unless the user is versed in both languages, this feature is self-defeating. After testing the product, I found that the quality of the translation was not too bad. For more information, visit the Translation Experts Ltd. Web site at <http://www.tranexp.com>.

Transparent Language, Inc. ****

We are getting closer to my prize winner, but first I must discuss my runner-up. Transparent Language, Inc. maintains a Web page called FreeTranslation.com. Its technology is called TranscendRT Machine Translation, which powers its Enterprise Translation Server, which in turn powers FreeTranslation.com. First, note that the service is free! Second, the user can test drive the product online. And third, the quality of the translation is excellent. The company allows the addition of a link to the library's/Web operator's site, so that its visitors may read the site in their own languages. I was very pleased with the translation results. For more information, please visit TL's two Web sites at <http://www.freetranslation.com> and <http://www.transparentlanguage.com>.

Systran, S.A. *****

Systran Internet Translation Technologies is considered the best by the experts. Without a doubt, this company provides an impressive software program. After reviewing the software, I agree with the experts' assessments: it is the best! It is not perfect, but it is the next-best thing. The quality of translation surpassed my expectations. Visit its site at <http://w4.systranlinks.com/config>. As Systran explains in its site, "Systran's expertise comes with over 30 years of building translation software products for the U.S. Department of Defense, the Commission of European Communities and some of the largest commercial multinational corporations." Systran provides machine translation solutions to clients such as Alta Vista, Lycos, Netscape, America Online, CompuServe and OracleMobile.com, Oracle's subsidiary for wireless services.

Systran offers its customers everything they desire in a translation program. First, it offers Web site solutions. This product comes in three levels. The basic free package isn't disappointing. The next level of service (silver version) is \$999 per year. Still, the free version will prove quite useful. The company allows the Web site provider

to add a link to its own site, so that its visitors can read the site in their own languages. Now about the other side of the story ... To translate somebody else's Web site, the situation changes. Systran offers this service, depending on the user's requirements, for as low as \$30. Free would be better, yes? Well, no need to despair. As I mentioned before, Systran has partners all over the Internet, and one of them, Altavista, allows free translation of Web pages. The best part is that Systran powers Altavista's machine translator, Babel Fish. So smile and take advantage of the services available. For more information, visit Systran's Web site at <http://northdelta.net/language.htm>.

Now a final word of caution about machine translation software programs: None of the programs in the market offers 100 percent accuracy. I learned in my indexing class that computer software programs designed to index a book do not compare with the work of a human indexer. The same holds true for translation software programs. They do a good job, but they cannot recognize some terms. In English, one word can mean two or three different things. In Spanish, there can be three different words available to translate one English word. For example, when the software programs encounter a word such as *view*, the programs do not know how the word is being used in the sentence. Does it mean *view* as in seeing or *view* as a point of view? The software programs also have problems assigning the appropriate verbs. They sometimes confuse a word used as a verb in Spanish and translate this word as a noun in English. Finally, these programs cannot recognize words such as *network* or *hyperlink*. It translates these words literally, making the Spanish translation confusing sometimes. That is not always the case. I will humbly point out that, for any person who does not speak English, the software would be very helpful. If I could not understand English, the software would be an oasis in a world full of foreign sites. Since these programs are not perfect, I would suggest including a caveat in any library's Web pages warning users of the programs' limitations. As a fluent speaker of Spanish, given the proper caveat, I would still be able to understand 85 percent to 90 percent of the intended message.

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