

I Need This in English

Ik heb dit in het Engels nodig. J'ai besoin de ceci en anglais. Ich benötige dieses auf englisch. Ho bisogno di questo in inglese. Eu necessito este em ingles. Necesito esto en ingles.

In today's global environment, lawyers, law students, and others in the legal community have a greater need than ever for international legal information. Users' expectations about the ease of accessing such information are sometimes unrealistic. It is a truism among librarians that users expect everything to be available online. Librarians who deal extensively with foreign materials notice an extension to this trend: users expect everything to be available online *in English*.

These users, however, are often disappointed because while English is becoming an increasingly global language, countries still publish their laws, court decisions, and other official information in their own languages. Professional translations of some of these documents are available, but by no means can all such information be found in English, online or otherwise.

What, then, can be done for users who need information that is only available in a

Web translators are useful tools to find context, but not precise translations

by Sarah Yates

foreign language that they do not understand? Professional translations are costly and may take a long time. Amateur translations by librarians or patrons are difficult and take time away from other important work; also, the reliability of amateur translations varies widely according to the translator's skills. For many translation needs, users and librarians alike are turning to Web-based translators as an alternative.

Computer programs have been used to translate one language to another for decades. However, not until such programs began to appear without charge on the Web in the 1990s did the general public gain ready access to "machine translation." AltaVista's Babel Fish (<http://babelfish.altavista.com>) is the most well known of the free Web translators. Others include the free

translator at Systran's Web site (www.systran.com), Google's translator on its Language Tools page (www.google.com/language_tools?hl=en), FreeTranslation.com (<http://www.freetranslation.com>), and WorldLingo's free online translator (www.worldlingo.com/en/products_services/worldlingo_translator.html). Short texts and even whole Web pages can be translated from Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, or Spanish into English—and vice versa.

Fast and Cheap

Machine translation has two distinct advantages over professional translation. First, it is much cheaper—an understatement when it comes to the free versions. Second, it is much quicker. Babel Fish, for example, can translate a 150-word block of text nearly instantaneously and most Web pages in a matter of seconds.

Is free Web translation a case of getting what you pay for? The answer depends upon what you want to use it for. Clearly, a rudimentary machine translation program cannot provide the same level of quality that a trained professional translator can. But while Web translators do have problems, they also have value in many library-related situations.

One reason Web translators can be so useful in a library setting is that hiring a



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professional translator is often impractical, particularly when the goal is simply to determine whether a particular resource contains the information a patron needs. In these cases, the choice is usually between online translation and do-it-yourself translation with a bilingual dictionary. Manual dictionary lookup only works for users with some knowledge of a particular language, since words in texts do not necessarily appear in their dictionary forms. Verbs are conjugated and nouns are declined—irregular forms may appear in good dictionaries, but for the most part, users need to be able to figure out infinitives, nominatives, and other basic word forms. Even for users or librarians who do know enough of a foreign language to be able to provide a rough translation, Web translators are much faster and may be good enough, depending on how precise the translation needs to be.

Advice from Law Librarian Users

I interviewed several foreign, comparative, and international law librarians about their use of Web-based translation programs and the extent to which they would recommend them. The responses ranged from enthusiastic to highly skeptical. While everyone I spoke with agreed that such programs are useful in some situations, no one found them reliable enough for all their translation needs, especially for complex or sensitive legal texts.

Law librarians' use of Web translators varies widely, from several times a week to a few times a year. The texts they translate include statutes and case law, government Web sites, news articles, and publishers' information.

Librarians who use Babel Fish and similar services generally use them for "gisting," that is, to get a general idea of the content of a text. Annette Demers, reference librarian for international, foreign, and comparative law at Harvard Law School Library, is a frequent user of Web translators. She uses them "to get a general sense of the meaning of titles and words and to help with generating online search terms," she says. "They are definitely not suitable for interpretation of research."

Kelly Vinopal, manager of library and information services at the American Society of International Law, echoes the sentiment. "I have used Babel Fish to get a sense of the content of an article but do not suggest that a researcher rely on it entirely," she says.

According to Katherine Topulos, foreign and international law librarian and lecturing fellow at Duke University School of Law Library, Web translators are fine for getting a general idea of what a document is about, but "especially for legal texts, you need an actual person who knows something about the law" to provide reliable translations.

Marci Hoffman, lecturer in residence and foreign and international law librarian at the University of California-Berkeley Law Library, cautions fellow law librarians about Web translators. "I think they are getting better," she says, "but I still would not rely upon them for translating a legal document, except for basic information."

Is it Adhesion or Liability?

In addition to general reservations about the reliability of Web translators, the librarians I interviewed noted some specific shortcomings. Homographs—words that are spelled alike but have different meanings—present a serious problem. Several librarians remarked on the inability of translation programs to select one of several possible translations based on context. For example, the German word *Haftung* can mean *adhesion* or *liability*, among other possible translations. In legal contexts it almost always means *liability*, but Babel Fish translates it as *adhesion* regardless of the context. "Sometimes [manual] word-by-word translation is more useful, because I can select from several meanings listed in



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—Lee Peoples, head of reference services, Oklahoma City University of Law

any good dictionary,” says Mary Sexton, foreign, comparative, and international law librarian at the University of Iowa Law Library. “Babel Fish does that selection for me.”

A related issue is technical terminology, or “terms of art.” Many words have both an ordinary meaning in general contexts and a specific, slightly different meaning in legal contexts. The phenomenon occurs in many languages; some examples from English are *agency*, *consideration*, and *interest*. Mary Rumsey, foreign, comparative, and international law librarian at the University of Minnesota Law School, notes that Web translators “are not designed to incorporate legal meanings of terms. In other words, if a document contains a word for which there is both a common usage and a less common, legal usage, the translation software will provide the common usage.”

Mary Strouse, associate director and head of technical services at Catholic

University of America's Judge Kathryn J. DuFour Law Library, performed some test translations from a Russian legal dictionary and saw this problem firsthand. "Terms of art are likely to give the most problems," she says. "Babel Fish did very well with the Russian dictionary when there was a one-to-one correspondence between phrases. For example, it correctly translated the terms for *mortgage*, *tax*, *law* (i.e., a statute), *fraud*, and *legal person*. On the other hand, it had trouble with *pledge*, preferring the more general 'guarantee.'"

Creative Reading

The translation of individual words is not the only problem; sentence structure is a major difficulty for Web translators as well. "It is not difficult to tell that the translation is automated," says Gail Partin, associate law librarian at Dickinson School of Law Library of the Pennsylvania State University. "Some of the syntax is clunky, and some sentences are unintelligible."

Rumsey explains the phenomenon. "Because the software generally does a word-for-word substitution rather than a more sophisticated 'intelligent' translation, even fairly simple text often gets garbled," she says. Companies that produce machine translation software often recommend pre-editing—rendering the text to be translated as simple and machine-translation friendly as possible before having it translated—and post-editing—cleaning up the translated text to make it more readable.

Pre-editing is not an option in a library setting, since neither librarians nor patrons generally have any control over the text they need to have translated. However, some degree of post-editing—or as Annette Demers puts it, "creative reading on the part of the user"—may help.

Web-based translation programs not only have linguistic glitches, but they have some technical ones as well. "Sometimes, when translating the full URLs in Babel Fish, it won't keep translating within the embedded links and the system breaks down at some point," says Heidi Kuehl, adjunct professor of law and reference/instructional services librarian at Marquette Law Library. "Then you need to retranslate the new page that you want."

Anne Burnett, reference/foreign and international law librarian at the University of Georgia Law Library, notes the less obvious problem that "much text is now embedded within graphics, and the programs don't translate that text."



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Non-Roman scripts can present a particular challenge; even diacritics, such as accent marks and umlauts, can present problems when a user types in text rather than pasting or translating an entire Web page. Some sites, such as WorldLingo (www.worldlingo.com/products_services/worldlingo_translator.html) and Free Translation.com (www.freetranslation.com) have drop-down menus for entering accented characters but no way to type in other scripts. Babel Fish has a link to a "World Keyboard" that allows users to type in Cyrillic characters as well as Roman characters with diacritics; however, this feature experiences frequent glitches that make it often unavailable.

User Instruction

Some law librarians worry that users may not be aware of the shortcomings of Web translators. Rumsey expresses concern about potential overreliance on translation programs. "When I listen to students and other library patrons who want translations of foreign legal materials, I am struck by their naïveté about how difficult and time-

consuming a good translation is," she says. "I have noticed this especially with patrons who do not know a second language. Lawyers with clients doing business in foreign countries have begun to demand legal translations, and at some point they'll try using free translators. But I would hate to think anyone would advise a client based on information from these software programs."

Rumsey's fears are not that far-fetched. Hoffman reports, "I once had a practicing lawyer in my office who wanted to rely on a translation (of a law) from one of these programs, and he did not understand why I was horrified."

One job of law librarians is to educate patrons about the appropriate use of Web translators, making users aware of the benefits of such programs, as well as the potential pitfalls. Librarians who teach legal research classes are in a unique position to provide instruction on translation programs. "I teach Babel Fish in my International ALR course as a good translation tool for foreign legal research when it's difficult to find English translations of foreign legal material, such as case law, legislation, and regulations," Kuehl says. "I warn my students that a translation tool cannot be relied upon as completely accurate or as the 'official' version of the text and, in practice, they might have to hire a professional translator for large documents (for a fee, of course)."

For Lee Peoples, head of reference services at Oklahoma City University of Law, the main purpose of discussing Web translators in his legal research class is to demonstrate their shortcomings to students. "Language is very important to lawyers, and I want to get the point across to my students that you cannot rely on these programs for a translation that you plan to use in the actual practice of law," Peoples says. "They might be useful for context, but it would be foolish to rely on them in analyzing legal problems."

Web translators are clearly not appropriate for all translation needs. They are not reliable enough when precision is important, such as for translating the texts of statutes. However, when the general meaning of a text is all that is required, they can be very useful. As long as they are used with their shortcomings in mind, Web translators deserve a place in every law librarian's tool bag. ■

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Web Translators and Their Features

Babel Fish

<http://babelfish.altavista.com>

Language pairs available:

To and from English: Chinese (traditional and simplified), Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish

To and from French: Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish

Comments:

- Translates Web pages or manually input text
- Also available as a “Translate” link next to certain foreign-language search results on AltaVista
- Powered by Systran

FreeTranslation.com

www.freetranslation.com

Language pairs available:

To and from English: Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish

From (but not to) English: Chinese (simplified and traditional), Norwegian

Comments:

- Translates Web pages or manually input text
- Russian translation provided by Prompt Translation Engine (www.prompt.ru); other languages by Enterprise Translation Server (www.sdl.com/enterprise-translation-server)

Google Language Tools

www.google.com/language_tools?hl=en

Language pairs available:

To and from English: French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish

To and from English (BETA): Chinese (simplified), Japanese, Korean

To and from French: German

Comments:

- Translates Web pages or manually input text

- Also available as a “Translate this Page” link next to certain foreign-language search results on Google
- No statement as to what company provides the translation, but translation results are almost always identical with those performed by Systran

Systran

www.systransoft.com

Language pairs available:

To and from English: Arabic, Chinese (traditional and simplified), Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish

To and from French: Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish

Comments:

- Translates Web pages or manually input text
- Requires registration for extended use
- Systran was an early pioneer in machine translation and continues to be one of the leading companies in the field

WorldLingo

www.worldlingo.com/wl/translate

Language pairs available:

To and from any combination of the following: Chinese (traditional or simplified), Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese (Brazil), Russian, Spanish.

Comments:

- Translates Web pages or manually input text
- Allows users to specify the subject area of the text from a drop-down menu; however, differences between “legal” and “general” translations, when they exist at all, tend to be very minor
- No statement as to what company provides the translation, but translation results are almost always identical with those performed by Systran

