



SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE
DES TRADUCTEURS
syndicat professionnel

**Statement on artificial intelligence
by the Steering Committee of the
Société française des traducteurs**

Translated English version published July 4, 2024

Translation: Steering Committee of the Société française des traducteurs

*This statement was drafted by the Steering Committee of the **Société française des traducteurs (SFT)**, and is based on the results of a survey conducted among its members between November and December 2023. It alerts contracting authorities to the challenges and the hidden facets of artificial intelligence (AI), as well as language service providers (LSPs), to the repercussions of AI on the language professions and working conditions. By providing them with facts to communicate more effectively with their clients and the general public, SFT encourages all professionals to endorse and share this statement with their peers.*

As a professional association for the translation and interpreting professions, the *Société française des traducteurs (SFT)* is closely monitoring technological developments in the language services industry. Generative artificial intelligence (GAI), based on large language models (LLMs), is currently disrupting the working conditions of many professions, including our own.

Our industry was one of the first to be affected by the introduction of AI-based IT tools. Neural machine translation (NMT), which emerged in 2016, is now widely adopted by the general public, as well as by language service providers and their customers. This experience and our professional expertise give us a unique perspective on the quality and reliability of “machine translation”, which we intend to share here to raise awareness of the limits of its uncontrolled use.

First, it's worth pointing out that **“artificial intelligence” is not endowed with intelligence, nor does it think**. Unlike human beings, algorithms do not have the capacity to understand, question and take account of context. Yet this is the very essence of translation and interpreting. To produce content, written or spoken, in another language, an AI system draws out what it has “learned” from **very large quantities of data**, and only after having **been trained by humans**, or by our own daily use of free-of-charge applications.

Generative AI tools like ChatGPT, which was released in 2023, **are statistical estimation software**. They are fascinating because of their high speed and naturalness in response, suggesting quality. However, on closer inspection, a native speaker or an experienced professional will quickly notice awkwardness, semantic changes, even contradictions or omissions. More seriously, generative AI produces partially or wholly false information by presenting it as true, because it prefers to “hallucinate” when it lacks data, rather than remain mute.

Realizing that machine translation is not deliverable in its present state, its developers and enthusiastic supporters, including the major translation agencies, task humans to correct it. In our profession, this exercise is called postediting, and is increasingly becoming the norm. **Yet 70% of our translator members who responded to our 2023 survey consider postediting (and by extension AI) as a threat to their business. Likewise, interpreters rank competition from AI as their main concern.**

Impacts on our professions

Market demand is shifting, reflecting indiscriminate reliance on new, untrained tools (hence free of charge).

Today, tools such as ChatGPT are easily accessible, and are being used by both individuals and companies who lack the skills necessary to control the translation process, and are untrained on the possibilities of AI. The indiscriminate use of these tools in translation either results in the **total disappearance** of our role as experts in languages and intercultural communication, or in the unchecked rush of translations that we are asked to enhance. **Human expertise must be maintained in the translation process.**

Our working conditions are deteriorating.

Due to a lack of control or transparency, machine translation is presented as enhanced human translation, even though its production, review, and editing do not take the same amount of time, nor is it invoiced in a comparable way.

For a professional quality result, postediting is often more time-consuming than human translation from scratch. It is a **tedious task** because it's not intellectually stimulating, and yet requires a heightened level of vigilance to detect errors that a human wouldn't make.

Postediting is very **poorly remunerated**, due to language service customers' unrealistic expectations of productivity and results. This technological optimism is further fueled by the need to recoup major investments in the deployment of new GAI-incorporated tools.

Under these conditions, machine-produced texts and speeches never attain a professional level of quality. Pressured by time, constrained and influenced by machine production, the humans in charge of postediting are not as efficient or creative as they could be if they were translating from scratch. We therefore must either admit and accept this inferior quality result, or else assume the inevitably higher cost of this service when the anticipated productivity gain has not materialized.

As with fast-fashion, a fast-translation cannot reconcile speed, quality and low rates. It's a choice of either speed and low rates, or quality and the right price!

What are you forgoing by using AI to translate and interpret, instead of language professionals?



Through their interaction with you and their comprehension of the audience to whom your communication is addressed, translators and interpreters **craft bespoke content**, with a critical eye on the source material to spot errors and incoherencies.



Translators and interpreters enrich their work with a **contextual analysis** that enables them to adapt the message, its tone and style, paying due regard to the strategic stakes of your communication and preserving the subtleties that machine-translation tools miss.





Mindful of the implications of their work, human practitioners also engage their personal **responsibility, ethics and sensitivity**. Thus, they are bulwarks against the misleading simplifications, shortcuts, distortions, misunderstandings and stereotypes that can result from automation.





Where machines filter and process data out of context, human translators and interpreters are **facilitators**, nurturing the messages you entrust to them, relaying them with care and thus **weaving a human network**.


Our warnings on AI


 While AI may appear to save time and money, the anticipated gains come **at the expense of quality**.


 Using AI to translate free of charge means **forgoing confidentiality and facing considerable risks: legal, economic, liability, security, reputational, manipulation; as well as error risks**.


 A translation, whether literary or pragmatic, is a creative work. As such, it is subject to copyright. It **cannot be plundered**. In the same way that intellectual property and personal data are protected by law, it should also be the case with the use of our work by AI. Our creative work is not free of rights.

 In terms of health, the postediting of machine production ultimately creates **mind-numbing fatigue**, undermines the discernment of the humans in charge of controlling it, and increases the risk of errors with far-reaching consequences.

 From a social standpoint, AI **is generating precariousness for both salaried and self-employed professionals**. The unequal balance of power chiefly benefits language service customers, and the distribution of the economic gains is largely asymmetrical. This economic model only enriches those who develop and exploit the technology.

 Environmentally, AI's phenomenal consumption of energy and natural resources (electricity to power data centers, water to cool them, etc.) is a **direct violation of both the UN sustainable development goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change**.

 Moreover, the indiscriminate use of AI in the fields of information and knowledge sharing poses **a risk of misinformation, falsification and data manipulation**.

 Since AI is based on learning data that are mainly Western and mostly in English, it is the antithesis of the translator's craft: **it harms diversity, thins out languages and accentuates inequalities between cultures**.

Our recommendations and demands

If generative artificial intelligence (GAI) is viewed as an assistant to human expertise, we are not opposed to its integration into our practice, but under no circumstances should it supplant human professionals, and it should always be used with the utmost caution.

The SFT calls for the protection of human creativity and expertise

Human-produced content is not free "data". Their authors must systematically be consulted before their exploitation is authorized. In support of the actions of other professional organizations, the SFT strives for recognition of the author status of all creators, including translators and interpreters, to preserve their moral and economic rights.

The SFT urges that language professionals should not be replaced by AI: recent studies are demonstrating the numerous errors, biases and prejudices conveyed by AI. Due to a self-sustaining system of online published contents, we risk the extinction of rare words and terms, an impoverishment of language. Furthermore, AI uses mainly English even when a request is submitted in another language, often translating from the source language to English, and then from English to the target language. This system favors English to the detriment of other languages.

To counter the pitfalls of AI, humans in the translation process must be fully recognized as critically minded experts, the only ones able to assess the relevance of using AI tools in a professional setting, and to set the price, production time and quality level of expected deliverables.

To this end, we demand that the State and its government services set the example by giving priority to human translation and interpreting for their own needs, and by withholding all funding for productions based entirely, or mainly, on generative artificial intelligence.

The SFT calls for greater transparency regarding the origin and production of content

Respect for human language professionals means greater transparency regarding the origin of content, so as to enable each one of us to assess its value. **Transparency must be the rule, and machine production must be clearly identified so as to distinguish it from human creation.**

Every citizen has the right to know whether a text or speech, either original or translated, is the product of an algorithm, to better counter the technological distortions that limit their ability to forge an informed opinion. Any person or company employing a human translator for the correction of a machine translation must specify the algorithm that produced it.

Likewise, translators and interpreters must be informed about the possible use of their work for AI training purposes.

The SFT demands a fair share of the economic value created by language services

Over recent years, we have observed an erosion in the price for, and the perceived value of translation and interpreting work. This race for profit and cost-cutting is leading to a decline in the quality of language services in certain market segments, a devaluation of our craft in the eyes of the general public, and precarious working conditions.

The SFT denounces the lowering of remuneration and the degradation of working conditions for highly-qualified professionals, even while the global market continues to grow. We remind language-service customers that translation and interpreting call for expertise in many fields, and are vectors of a positive corporate image. They should accordingly be viewed as an investment, not a cost. The economic value these skills generate must be shared more equitably between the industry operators who benefit from them and those who create them.

We encourage translation agencies with best practices towards freelance translators and interpreters – a vital link in the value chain – to continue along this path. We remind the major translation agencies that improving the entire ecosystem, through closer and more respectful collaboration with all stakeholders, is the key to a sustainable future.

The SFT alerts on the demise of language professionals

Replacing human expertise in content creation will necessarily lead to the erosion of both the know-how and the appeal of our professions.

Specialized academic programs are already struggling to recruit students willing to embark on lengthy studies with limited career opportunities, leading them towards increasingly undervalued and precarious professions. Under the threat of being replaced by AI, large numbers of experienced translators and interpreters could, in the long run, find themselves out of work.

How willing is society to assume the financial responsibility for the massive retraining of tens of thousands of professionals, albeit already highly-qualified professionals? Is it really willing to do without their skills, and see an immemorial profession, an essential vector of global communication and collaboration, vanish into thin air?

Language, as the expression of human thought, is a major challenge for the development of GAI. Automated language production has a far from negligible impact on creativity and critical thinking, exposing our society to the risk of standardization, disinformation, and even manipulation.

The SFT alerts educators and public authorities in charge of educational and university curricula to the importance of training the younger generations and, in particular, future translators and interpreters. These must continue to be trained to acquire the ability to learn, verify information, exercise their critical faculties, create, write and translate without artificial aids, in order to maintain mastery of their craft and guarantee the preservation of a know-how that is essential to a discerning use of artificial intelligence. Otherwise, originality, unbiased representation and, more generally, human sensitivity will disappear from intercultural communication.



In conclusion, technology must remain a tool at the service of our craft. One that must be urgently safeguarded if we are to maintain dialogue and exchange between cultures.

Professional translators and interpreters are fully aware of the need to adapt to technological developments, and of the need of productivity gains to meet growing demand. However, the long-held fantasy of replacing those practitioners with an instantaneous, universal digital solution is quixotic, for beyond words, intercultural communication, whether oral or written, cannot forgo a detailed understanding of the context in which such communication takes place. It takes professionals years to acquire expertise and to master their craft that a machine merely mimics.

The systematic replacement of human professionals by an entity that knows neither reflection nor empathy is not desirable, and is even detrimental when the stakes are high.

The Steering Committee of the *Société française des traducteurs* is voicing the substantial concerns of the professions it represents **to ensure that human beings remain at the heart of this new technology**, and that the unsupervised development of generative AI solutions for translation and interpreting purposes does not lead to the impoverishment both of language and of critical thinking, which are the very essence of communication and of our Humanity.

Glossary

AI system: “AI system” means a machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments; (EU Artificial Intelligence Act, Chapt.1, Art. 3, 2024)

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI): a category of AI that focuses on the autonomous creation of content (text, images, video, sound and other types of data) by computer systems.

General-purpose AI model (GPAI): an AI model, including when that AI model is trained using a large amount of data, using large-scale self-supervised learning (SSL), that exhibits significant generality and is capable of competently performing a wide range of distinct tasks, regardless of how the model is marketed, and that can be integrated into a variety of downstream systems or applications, with the exception of AI models used for research, development or prototyping activities prior to market release.

Postediting: the ISO 17100 standard defines postediting as the activity of editing and correcting machine-translation output (clause 2.2.4).

Bibliography

Actualitté. Droit d'auteur et IA: un rapport à l'Élysée tourné vers l'Europe [in French – A report to [the French President] with a European outlook – online]: <https://actualitte.com/article/116184/legislation/droit-d-auteur-et-ia-un-rapport-a-l-elysee-tourne-vers-l-europe>. (Retrieved March 13, 2024)

Arte. The Digital World and Us - Automatic Translation and AI : <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/110863-004-A/the-digital-world-and-us/>. (Retrieved May 15, 2024)

American Translators Association. Traduction automatique et post-édition [*Machine translation and post-editing*], ATLF survey conducted from November 20 to December 13, 2022. ATLF website [online]: <https://www.atanet.org/advocacy-outreach/ata-statement-on-artificial-intelligence>. (Retrieved March 5, 2024)

Association des Traducteurs Littéraires de France (ATLF). Traduction automatique et post-édition [*Machine translation and post-editing*], ATLF survey conducted from November 20 to December 13, 2022. ATLF website [online]: <https://atlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ENQUETE-TRADUCTION-AUTOMATIQUE.pdf>. (Retrieved March 5, 2024)

Aurélien Béné, Joris Falip, Philippe Lacour. “Quand Abel tue Caïn”: ce qui échappe à la traduction automatique” [*When Abel kills Cain, what eludes the grasp of machine translation*], HAL, March 31, 2024. [online]: https://hal.science/hal-04528185?fbclid=IwAR1wtsjoSRorXmNsFzKQS7iG7qpJ3khS8brEvbRMI9iFo7QYHdXipCw1tVM_aem_AYhuDSAjXH8M5n7PjWnMrHdnDQc1ePaRsW22HipXzS6KD2r3s-vWCW9fwL0XGos-dSlj9IyFzVykFkHSUuGZU9Jj. (Retrieved on June 5, 2024)

Brian Thompson, Mehak Preet Dhaliwal, Peter Frisch, et al. *A Shocking Amount of the Web is Machine Translated: Insights from Multi-Way Parallelism* [online]: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2401.05749>. (Retrieved March 21, 2024)

Council of Europe. The Council of Europe adopts the first international treaty on Artificial intelligence [online]: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-adopts-first-international-treaty-on-artificial-intelligence>. (Retrieved May 17, 2024)

En Chair et en os. Littérature, cinéma, presse, jeux vidéo : non à des traductions sans âme [*Literature, cinema, press, video games: no to soulless translations* – online]: <https://enchairetenos.org/>. (Retrieved March 25, 2024)

EPFL. *Does Artificial Intelligence work in English?* [online]: <https://actu.epfl.ch/news/does-artificial-intelligence-work-in-english-2>. (Retrieved March 15, 2024)

Bibliography

European Council of Literary Translators' Associations. *German Joint Open Letter and Manifesto for Human Language* [online]: <https://www.ceatl.eu/german-joint-open-letter-and-manifesto-for-human-language>, (retrieved on March 6, 2024) ; and *Statement on Artificial Intelligence* [online]: <https://www.ceatl.eu/tools-of-the-trade/statement-on-artificial-intelligence>. (Retrieved March 5, 2024)

European Writers Council. *Joint Statement on Generative Artificial Intelligence and the EU AI Act* [online]: https://europeanwriterscouncil.eu/240425_cwos_jointstatement_ai-act/. (Retrieved April 26, 2024)

Fédération internationale des traducteurs (FIT) – International Federation of Translators. FIT Position Paper on Machine Translation, 2019 [online]. Available on: https://library.fit-ift.org/public/Publications/positionpapers/PDP_201908_Machine_Translation_ENFR.pdf. (Retrieved March 6, 2024)

FIT Europe. *The ecological costs of neural machine translation.* FIT Europe YouTube channel [online]. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRKObtITEdg>. (Retrieved May 30, 2024)

European Parliament. Regulation (EU) 2024... of the European Parliament and Council of the European Union on artificial intelligence – room document: corrigendum. European Parliament website [online]: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0138-FNL-COR01_EN.pdf and on: <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/the-act/>. (Retrieved May 30, 2024)

Société française des traducteurs. Enquête sur les pratiques professionnelles des interprètes en France – SFT survey of interpreters' professional practices in France. SFT website [online]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oko9-geruWc>. (Retrieved December 15, 2023)

Société française des traducteurs. “Alerte sur les risques de l'intelligence artificielle” Joint letter from AIIC France, AFICI and the SFT alerting a number of French government officials to the risks of artificial intelligence [in French]. SFT website [online]: https://www.sft.fr/global/gene/link.php?doc_id=615&edit_lang=fr. (Retrieved May 17, 2024)

European Union. EU Artificial Intelligence Act, IA Act Explorer website [online]: <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/fr/ai-act-explorer/>. (Retrieved June 5, 2024)