



Multilingual 3.0

Predictions for the language industry in 2025

White Paper

Part 2: Humans and machines, not humans vs. machines by Isabelle Weiss

In the second part of Multilingual 3.0 – our series of predictions for the language industry – we talked to Alpha’s founder Isabelle Weiss about her thoughts on how “human” translation continues to evolve and why linguists will always have an important role to play in the language industry.

Discussed in more detail below, here are her first four predictions. (You can read more of Isabelle’s predictions in our forthcoming eBook, Multilingual 3.0).

- **Prediction #1:** The evolution of “translators” into “linguists” and “language experts” will continue.
- **Prediction #2:** The language industry will need both generalist and specialist linguists.
- **Prediction #3:** AI and machine translation won’t threaten the careers of agile, motivated linguists.
- **Prediction #4:** Human expertise and insight will remain crucial to the language industry.

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Prediction #1: The evolution of “translators” into “linguists” and “language experts” will continue.

When you type “translator” into Google you get a multitude of hits for electronic translators: online, in the cloud, on your mobile. Much of the time, therefore, the term is connected to a device, a software, a robot, rather than a human.

The term “translator” as a profession or a vocation has become somewhat devalued, and that is one reason why we at Alpha were looking for alternatives – such as language expert, language specialist, linguistic consultant, etc.

Another reason has to do with the widening scope of activities that “translators” are actually involved in. It is no longer “just” taking a source text and converting it into an equivalent target. Instead, there are many new tasks and responsibilities. The word “linguist” is more fluid, more of a generic term, in that respect.

These days, a linguist might be translating for half the day, reviewing somebody else’s output for two hours, and spending time post-editing machine output or testing an app on various devices. They could be thinking up slogans for a marketing campaign or researching whether particular images would be acceptable in his/her locale. All perfectly respectable tasks, but not what one would automatically connect with translation.

The change from “translator” to “linguist” or “language specialist” is intended to capture this more varied set of skills and responsibilities and to open up a more agile and versatile approach. At the same time, it is intended to bring the translators out of the shadows somewhat, out of their inward-looking, anonymous existence, exposing them more to direct contact with clients and more interaction with the world.

Prediction #2: The language industry will need both generalist and specialist linguists.

There has been some talk that the future for linguists will be about specialising in certain subject matter areas and that the days of the “generalist” linguist are numbered.

In fact, both specialists and generalists will continue to be needed. More than being defined as a specialist or a generalist, what’s most important are the qualities of agility and curiosity, and the good sense to know when to ask questions (and, likewise, when to just get on with it).

Three of the most valuable assets (apart from excellent language skills) for linguists are curiosity, common sense and empathy.

Curiosity helps to get into new fields and absorb useful bits and pieces quickly. Common sense is great for spotting obvious errors and contradictions. And it also helps to insert those wonderful “connectors” between sentences that guide the reader and highlight the thread of the argument (as opposed to translating rigidly, sentence by sentence, with no logic).

Empathy is needed firstly to understand what the author of a text wants to convey, and secondly to put yourself in the shoes of the audience. These three attributes are what a machine lacks.

Let's also be clear: it is very rare to find true subject-matter specialists who are translators. If someone has studied for seven years to become a vet, she/he is not going to earn their living as a translator, are they? Similarly, if you're an investment wizard, why would you want to go into translation?

Translators have always had to be "chameleons". They can change their coat quickly as and when needed, get into a new subject area, read up about it, learn the vocabulary. That's supposed to be part of their mental equipment.

Prediction #3: AI and machine translation won't threaten the careers of agile, motivated linguists.

I don't think AI and machine translation are a threat to good linguists.

However, they are perhaps a threat to those who chose the profession for the wrong reasons, because they couldn't think of anything else to do, or who stumbled into it by accident. Or indeed those who were initially motivated and competent, but over time lost their interest and their verve and are simply carrying on in a lacklustre sort of way. These people might find it hard and frustrating to "battle against the machine".

Those who really love their profession and want to stick with it, as long as they are agile, will continue to be in demand and find work, inasmuch as there will always be a subset of clients who do care about quality and the human touch, which is needed in expressive texts that provide more than plain information.

So if you have "what it takes" – the above three attributes of curiosity, common sense and empathy – plus the versatility to get to grips with evolving technologies and getting involved with linguistic and cultural tasks that go beyond translation, you can survive.

It is also worth remembering that the advance of AI does not focus on translation. There are many other professions that are being targeted: solicitors, shop assistants, even doctors, or film actors, and artists even (example: computers designing clothes, creating poetry, etc).

Prediction #4: Human expertise and insight will remain crucial to the language industry.

As already mentioned in the previous prediction, machines still lack many of the qualities that are required to ensure a translation is "just right", with the appropriate tone and style. This is particularly true of anything that needs to appeal to the emotional side of people, win them over, hold their attention, etc, rather than simply conveying bland, straightforward information.

But the need for human translators goes beyond translation skills. It also involves decision-making, consultancy and research. (And this takes us back to the first topic, and why perhaps we might like to go over to calling them “language experts” or “language specialists”.)

Don't forget that the MT engines need to be trained. Right at this moment, the famous Alexa and Siri are trying to learn new languages – minority languages like Irish or Swiss German. So hundreds of people are training them, while others are constantly improving machine output by correcting generated sentences.

Another area where I see an ongoing (even increasing) need for human linguistic activity is the emergence of poorly written source materials. These rely heavily on the ingenuity and the good will of the human translator.

By contrast, the machine will simply take what is thrown at it; it does not have the sense to question the material or go beyond what is written on the page. So badly written source is one guarantor for the continued need for human translators/transcreators/geniuses – whatever you want to call them.

The reasons for badly written source materials are manifold: often lack of time by the authors, but mostly authors who are writing in their second or third language rather than their mother tongue. It also includes people who are asked to produce presentations or white papers without having had practice or instruction on how to formulate in a clear, concise manner. This can leave a lot to the translator's imagination and imposes extra workload on them.

Badly written source materials (sadly) won't disappear. So the need for skilled linguists to make sense of them won't vanish either.

Biography

Isabelle Weiss, Founder, Alpha CRC



Isabelle, from Zug in Switzerland, has 50 years of professional experience translating/reviewing/post-editing from English and French into German (DE_DE and DE_CH) and from DE and FR into EN (amounting to some 30 million translated words). She was chief examiner and chief moderator for the Institute of Linguists' DipTrans for a number of years..

Apart from commercial translation, she is fascinated by literature and literary translation and was instrumental in getting one of the greatest works of German 20th-century literature published in English, Albert Vigoleis Thelen's *Island of Second Sight*. She has also followed with great interest the evolution of machine translation over the past 30 years, but feels that even now, human creativity and cooperation is essential when quality matters.

The future is multilingual 3.0

As part of Multilingual 3.0, Alpha's team of in-house experts explore how digital transformation in the language industry is going to affect the role of human translators, internationalization strategies, e-commerce localization and individual sectors such as games and lifestyle.

Part 1 on the future of machine translation is available [here](#).

As ever, if you have any thoughts on the above or predictions of your own, please drop us a line at: alphamarketing@alphacrc.com.

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