
Whistleblowing on AI: translators sharing experience and thoughts

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Abstract

IA-lerte générale is a France-based collective of non-literary translators aimed at developing critical thinking on AI. Its objective is to debunk the enthusiastic and predominant narrative around AI in the translation industry and beyond. By sharing their experiences and thoughts on social media (LinkedIn) and at technology-related events, they shed light on good and bad practices. They also relay techno-critical messages from other voices as well as considerations on time, work and sense of purpose. In this way, IA-lerte générale tries to extend its reach beyond the translation microcosm.

Due to the nature of their work, translators are invisible, as a good quality translation is not perceived as a translation but as a text directly written in target language. Furthermore, they are often contractually required to waive all rights on their work, which they rarely sign. The industry is fragmented and relies on successive subcontracting, with freelance translators working in isolation at the very end of the chain. These conditions enable their exploitation by translation agencies, which has been exacerbated by AI-powered Machine Translation (MT).

Since the launch of DeepL Translator in 2017, translation agencies have increasingly used and imposed MT on translators, leveraging its alleged benefits in terms of efficiency and productivity to reduce rates and delivery times. This, in turn, led to a gradual deterioration of translators' working conditions and income, resulting in labour intensification, in a context of ever-growing asymmetric relationships between agencies and freelancers, with all the cognitive and physical health issues this situation may entail – all the more for people running their own business. Collective resistance and awareness are the only possible answers to this critical situation and to the lack of a clear position from official professional instances.

Keywords: translation, technocriticism, platform work, collective

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