

Computer Aids to Translation

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1. THE STARTING POINT

The Federal Office of Languages of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundessprachenamt, BSprA) is (when taking into account its subsidiary agencies) one of the world's largest language services. Its Department of Applied Linguistics has to produce, on a continuous basis, large numbers of translations into and from a multitude of languages. Just a few languages, however, constitute the lion's share, and they are: English with about 60%, French with just under 20%, and Russian with almost 10%. The BSprA deals primarily with technical texts of a high degree of difficulty, which must be translated with the highest possible level of accuracy. Only about 5% of all these translations are so-called "information transfers" which can be translated in a cursory manner.

Leaving aside the special circumstances in Canada, the translation problem for Germany is particularly acute. Depending on the subject field, approximately 60% of the world's technical literature is written in English, whereas only 5 to 10% appears in German. Furthermore, in practically all of the international organizations that are important for us, English is an official language; in most of them (apart from the European Communities), however, this does not apply to German (UNO, NATO, etc.) which again causes a huge quantitative translation problem.

Over 50% of our translations are regulations — mostly of a technical nature — for the Federal Armed Forces; they must therefore be produced in a manner that is ready for publication, such that they can be widely circulated and are accepted as legally binding. A good 80% of the remaining translations are bi- or multilateral documents which, as contractual documents or aids to political decision-making, must also meet the highest standards.

The volume of the texts to be translated induced the BSprA to study at an early stage possible ways of automating the translation process. The reasons for doing this were of a diverse nature:

- First and foremost, it was a matter of improving the quality of the translations;
- the translation output was to be increased, whereby
- the costs were to be reduced;
- the translation process had to be speeded up in order to ensure the topicality of the information contained in the translations;