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Creativity as a sustainable future for translators?

Abstract

The introduction of neural machine translation (NMT) led to a significant increase in the quality of machine translation. This has led to many people questioning the future of the translation profession. However, empirical data on the development of the translation industry shows that the demand for human translators remains high. Despite this, automation, process planning, and the relocation of value creation require a reorientation of the translation profession. Creative multilingual text production is often mentioned as a fallback option. However, since the publication of the chatbot ChatGPT and other so-called large language models (LLMs), the performance of these generative AI systems has also reached a new level. In this paper, the question posed in the title is answered in the negative on the basis of four criteria. It is concluded that the reorientation of the translation profession needs to be reconsidered and placed on a more sustainable basis.

1 Introduction

The rapid advancements in translation technology, particularly in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), have significantly transformed the translation industry and resulted in a reassessment of the role of human translators. The widespread adoption of these innovative tools has instilled a pervasive sense of displacement among translators and trainers, especially among professional translators: “Literature suggests that translators’ work satisfaction and their career motivation have been adversely affected” (Sakamoto et al. 2024).

Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of translator profiles, we shall propose a tentative classification of translation activities based on their financial and business implications. Three distinct categories are identified (Sandrini 2017: 142):

- (1) Philological-academic domain: This domain encompasses the translation of literary works, philosophical, philological and scientific publications. It prioritizes cultural exchange, knowledge dissemination, and textual fidelity, often with limited direct financial remuneration.
- (2) Volunteer-cooperative sphere: This sphere involves translation undertaken by non-professional individuals or communities, driven by passion, shared interests, or

altruistic motives. Examples include fan translations of media content and user-generated translations on collaborative platforms.

- (3) Commercial translation sector: This sector comprises professional translation services specializing in various domains, with a primary focus on market demands and profitability. It serves clients seeking high-quality, linguistically accurate translations within specific deadlines and budgets.

This paper focuses exclusively on the professional translation industry sector, excluding niche subcategories like hobbyist translation (sectors 1 and 2) that do not contribute significantly to its economic landscape. And it is the third group which feels threatened the most by generative AI. In response to the perceived threat of automatic machine translation, translators and translator trainers often adopt two main approaches:

- (1) Rejection and competition: This entails strongly affirming the inherent creative edge of human translators and aiming for absolute quality, essentially positioning humans as direct competitors of machines. Psychologically, this stance might stem from an underlying sense of vulnerability or powerlessness in the face of rapid technological advancements that can be challenging to grasp.
- (2) Adaptation and collaboration: This strategy involves a significant shift in translator skills and a redefined core responsibility of human translators. It focuses on harnessing the full potential of AI by leveraging machine capabilities to augment and enhance human expertise.

Overcoming the initial instinctive resistance to machine translation and every form of AI requires a critical reevaluation of the translator's self-perception by rethinking "our superior anthropomorphic positions" (O'Brien 2024: 5). By embracing the proactive second approach, translators can "benefit from machines through human-centered (though not necessarily superior) approaches, asking how limited human abilities can be amplified by complementary machine abilities" (O'Brien 2024: 5).

In the following, we will try to frame a negative response to the question devised in the title. Four reasons will be given in favor of such an argumentation touching upon the following points:

- nuanced understanding of creativity (see section 2);
- sustainability of professional activities (see section 3);
- superior alternatives (see section 4);
- re-organization of competences (see section 5).

2 Creativity: A complex concept

Identifying and pinpointing the precise characteristics of the concept of creativity has proved particularly challenging in translation studies: Accordingly, O'Sullivan describes creativity as "a rather slippery concept for translation scholars" (O'Sullivan 2013–2016). Thus, a variety of different specifications have emerged: "A significant problem with the

creativity argument is that the concept of creativity is very difficult to define and measure and there are various definitions for the term” (O’Brien 2012: 13). Kußmaul (2000), for example, proposed a very broad definition of creativity two decades ago:

Eine kreative Übersetzung entsteht aufgrund einer obligatorischen Veränderung des Ausgangstexts, und sie stellt etwas mehr oder weniger Neues dar, das zu einer bestimmten Zeit und in einer (Sub-)Kultur von Experten [...] im Hinblick auf einen bestimmten Verwendungszweck als mehr oder weniger angemessen akzeptiert wird. (Kußmaul 2000: 31)

‘A creative translation springs from an obligatory modification to the source text and constitutes something that is more or less new and is accepted as more or less appropriate in a (sub-)culture of experts [...] at a specific time and with regard to a specific intended purpose.’ (My translation)

Kußmaul argues that any translation inherently involves creativity, as it modifies the source text to create a new one in a different language. Extending this view to machine translation, we can hypothesize that machines already exhibit creative potential. To illustrate, we translated a restaurant’s webpage using both a conventional NMT (neural machine translation) tool (DeepL) and a generative AI (GenAI) tool (Google Gemini). This admittedly limited comparison allows us to contrast the creative input of each system architecture and demonstrates advancements in translation technology.

Source text DE¹

Das Landgasthaus in Innsbruck

Tirolerisch – naturnah – ehrlich – echt ... und immer gemütlich

Unser Gasthof und unsere Landwirtschaft gehören untrennbar zusammen. Mit viel Einsatz und Liebe verwenden wir alles, was wir in der Landwirtschaft erzeugen, auch in unserer Küche:

- Kalbfleisch, unsere Kälber werden zu 100 % mit frischer Vollmilch gefüttert
- Rind- und Lammfleisch
- Milch
- Kaminwurzeln
- aus unserem Bauerngarten kommen täglich die frischen Kräuter, Salate und die Gemüsevielfalt im Jahresreigen in die Küche, und die frischen Blumen als Gruß für unsere Gäste auf den Tisch.

DeepL translation EN (March 2024)

The country inn in Innsbruck

Tyrolean – close to nature – honest – genuine ... and always cozy

Our inn and our farm are inseparable. We put a lot of effort and love into using everything we produce on the farm in our cuisine:

- Veal, our calves are fed 100 % fresh whole milk
- Beef and lamb
- Milk
- Kaminwurzeln sausages
- fresh herbs, salads and a variety of vegetables from our farm garden are brought into the kitchen every day, and fresh flowers are served to our guests.

¹ Source text: Planötzenhof (2025).

Now, we will not enter into a detailed discussion of translation quality or style. This section rather focuses on NMT systems' ability to translate accurately at the sentence level, closely mirroring the original. Applying Kußmaul's basic definition of creativity to NMT, this effort itself can be considered creative. However, other studies adopt a different approach to defining creativity in translation, emphasizing human-centric factors (e. g., Guerberof-Arenas/Toral 2022).

In other disciplines, creativity is defined in a completely different way. Business management disciplines, for example, describe the most important characteristics of the term with the four Ps:

- (1) **Person:** A creative person has a fine sense for problems, is mentally flexible, thinks outside the box, is able to redefine existing objects and concepts, and has a complex mindset.
- (2) **Process:** The creative thinking process has four phases: preparation, incubation, inspiration and review; and the creative process can be taught.
- (3) **Press:** This category describes the relationship between human beings and their environment. Everyone perceives their environment as unique, which ultimately affects the way in which new ideas are created.
- (4) **Product:** A creative product should be surprising, original, valuable and useful. If you examine a product and trace it back to the moment of inspiration, you may be able to understand the thoughts and events that led to the idea.

While the Four Ps (Person, Process, Press and Product) are typically applied to marketing strategies for human-produced goods and services, two of these dimensions, Person and Press, hold limited applicability to generative AI models due to their inherent human nature. However, the remaining two Ps, Product and Process, offer valuable frameworks for understanding and evaluating the creative potential of AI. Creativity is often characterized by the ability to recombine, re-conceptualize, or transform existing knowledge within a given domain. This aligns closely with the observed functionalities of large language models, which leverage sophisticated pattern recognition and statistical analysis to generate novel, surprising, and potentially useful textual outputs.

To exemplify the creative capabilities of generative AI, we presented Gemini with a task based on the same source text, but with a more detailed prompt instructing the model to act as a multilingual creative marketing expert: "You are a multilingual creative marketing expert in tourism. Please translate this German text from the website of a rural organic restaurant in the Alps into English for the website of the restaurant". While Gemini initially generated a basic, sentence-by-sentence translation likely utilizing Google Translate, it subsequently and without asking produced a second version, demonstrably influenced by the specific requirements outlined in the prompt. Gemini suggests the following "refinements for a more engaging and informative English version":

- Highlight the local, seasonal aspect: 'Enjoy the flavors of Tyrol with our seasonal menu, featuring ingredients harvested daily from our farm.'
- Emphasize the quality of the meat: 'Savor the tenderness of our veal, raised on a diet of 100 % fresh whole milk, and the rich flavor of our grass-fed beef and lamb.'
- Invite guests to experience the farm-to-table connection: 'From our farm to your table, experience the true taste of Tyrol. Join us for a meal and discover the heart and soul of our family-run inn.'

Revised English Translation

Discover the Heart of Tyrol at Our Country Inn. Experience the authentic flavors of Tyrol at our cozy inn. Every dish is crafted with fresh, locally-sourced ingredients from our very own farm. Savor the tenderness of our veal, raised on a diet of 100% fresh whole milk, and the rich flavor of our grass-fed beef and lamb. Enjoy the freshest herbs, salads, and seasonal vegetables, harvested daily from our garden. Join us for a meal and discover the true taste of Tyrol.

(Google Gemini Model 1.5 Flash, March 2024)

Notably, the revised translation deviated significantly from the initial NMT output, suggesting the system's capacity for creative adaptation. This revised version demonstrably functioned as a superior marketing text, exceeding the NMT translation in terms of its ability to engage and motivate the target audience. Furthermore, the system explicitly identified the elements it added or modified, providing transparency into its creative process:

This revised version highlights the unique selling points of the restaurant, such as:

- The close connection between the farm and the kitchen
- The high quality of the ingredients
- The seasonal nature of the menu
- The warm and welcoming atmosphere.

(Google Gemini Model 1.5 Flash, March 2024)

The resulting text exhibits better suitability for a restaurant's webpage, suggesting an enhanced capacity to engage the target audience. While NMT translation might align with Kußmaul's definition of creativity, this revised text arguably represents a further advancement in the creative capabilities of GenAI.

Although human creative writers could achieve similar results, the AI approach offers significant advantages in terms of efficiency and cost. This raises important questions about the future role of human translators in such contexts, where criteria like audience engagement and marketing effectiveness as well as efficiency may hold greater weight than strict linguistic accuracy.

TAUS identifies content generation, particularly for marketing and support materials, as a primary application area for AI in translation (TAUS 2023). This aligns with the demonstrated potential of generative AI models like Gemini to produce creative and engaging texts tailored to specific audiences, as illustrated in the previous example. Other potential applications include synthetic data generation for model training, multi-lingual question-answering systems, machine translation plug-ins and quality estimation tools. These advancements raise crucial questions regarding the future role of human translators and the sustainability of human-driven translation in light of the evolving technological landscape.

3 Sustainability

Within the translation industry, creative multilingual writing and creative translation represent a distinct specialization alongside other areas such as localization, audiovisual translation, and legal/medical translation. Literature suggests that creative translation or transcreation might be a valid response to growing automatization: “If translators are to survive, they must make the transcreational turn” (Katan 2016: 378).

Our primary interest lies in examining the profitability and sustainability of creative translation services in light of the proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) applications. A 2022 report by NoGood.io (2022) identified a widening range of AI-powered marketing tools offering functionalities like copywriting, personalized campaigns, and data analysis.

This diversified landscape highlights the increasing adoption of AI technologies within the marketing sphere, intensifying competition with human translators. And its capabilities are not limited to speed and data processing. Recent advancements have shown promising progress in incorporating nuances and adapting to specific marketing text features, as the example above has shown. This development raises concerns about the potential for AI to replace human translators in creative multilingual writing and translation, posing an existential threat to the sustainability of this profession. And the ELIS 2024 report suggests: “Creative translation and localisation, both considered positive growth activities in 2023, are now more on the negative growth side” (ELIS 2024: 14). Thus, advanced AI tools present new challenges for professionals in creative multilingual writing and translation. Two primary strategies have emerged in response, but it’s important to note that both strategies have their limitations:

- (1) Specialization in niche areas and translating texts with the highest level of difficulty: This involves focusing on areas where AI currently struggles, such as highly technical translations involving legal or cultural complexities, or content demanding deep cultural understanding and nuanced expression, such as e. g. poetry or advertising. While offering refuge for now, the ever-evolving AI landscape may eventually render even highly specialized areas accessible to machines.
- (2) Post-editing machine-generated outputs: This strategy leverages AI’s strengths in speed and data processing by having human translators refine and improve machine-generated translations. Researchers predicted early on that “statistical-based MT, along with its many hybrids, is destined to turn most translators into post-editors one day, perhaps soon” (Pym 2013: 488) and “indeed, post-editing MT was recognized as one of the fastest growing segments of language industry even before NMT has gained widespread use” (Kenny 2018: 66). However, its long-term sustainability is questionable. As AI models continue to improve, the need for extensive post-editing may decrease, potentially reducing the demand for human involvement and reducing market demand.

Consequently, these strategies appear to provide only temporary reprieves, as research suggests limited long-term prospects for post-editing as a career path: “PMs in the focus groups did not seem to regard MTPE as a long-lasting occupation” (Sakamoto 2021: 253).

Moreover, creative translation services probably would not be able to provide an increase in social status or yield higher earnings for translators due to the professional hierarchy in the creative business as this study shows:

Another reason why transcreation may not be able to offer an attractive alternative job opportunity for translators can be observed in an analysis of transcreation production processes (Pedersen 2017). Pedersen’s ethnographic study reveals that the agent who enjoys a strong decision-making power in the transcreational production process is the person who is in a job role called Transcreation Manager, not the translator. In this professional configuration, any creative input by a translator must be approved by the decision-making agent. Without that authority, the translator (or the transcreator, as job titles vary) is deprived of a prestigious status in the hierarchy of the production system.

(Sakamoto 2021: 249)

To ensure the enduring viability of translation as a profession, a more multifaceted approach is necessary. Given the continuous advancements in neural machine translation and generative artificial intelligence, human translators will need to develop additional strategies and adapt their skill sets to maintain or even expand their professional scope and activity potential.

4 Superior alternatives

It is essential to recognize and accept the limited validity of current options and seek long-term alternatives. This necessitates a strategic shift in the business orientation of human translators, requiring them to transition away from the traditional product-oriented service – increasingly replaced by machines. So far, many translators worked on a piecework basis, meaning they were paid per word or per line translated. Thus, translators were often under pressure to work quickly, which could lead to errors, they were not always paid a fair rate for their work, and had little control over their working hours or conditions. In recent years, there has been a move away from piecework in the translation industry. This is due to a number of factors: an increasing use of automated translation which has reduced the demand for human translators, as well as the rise of online translation platforms, which have made it easier for translators to find work. On the other side these platforms present drawbacks such as loss of control, status and agency, increased monitoring and algorithmic surveillance, low pay, job security and exploitation (cf. Baumgarten/Bourgadel 2024: 510).

The move away from piecework has a number of benefits: Translators can now focus on quality rather than quantity, they are more likely to be paid a fair rate for their work, and they are more autonomous in their work, as Baumgarten and Bourgadel (2024) suggest. Of course, there are also some challenges associated with this shift; for

example, translators may need to work harder to find clients and negotiate their rates. However, the long-term benefits of moving away from piecework are clear. Translators who are able to make this shift will be well-positioned to succeed in the years to come.

The goal should be a process-oriented approach that leverages human expertise more effectively. Translators would no longer focus solely on producing individual target texts tailored to each order and recipient. Instead, they would focus on developing efficient workflows and optimizing translation processes for the production of high-quality target texts, regardless of the actual producer, be it human or machine. Thus, human translation experts primarily focus on tasks beyond the pure act of translating. While they may occasionally engage in direct translation, their core responsibilities involve planning, organizing, evaluating translations, and managing multilingual projects for clients.

Mellinger proposes necessary skills to promote machine translation literacy that would also fit into the planning and organizational framework: “terminology management, controlled authoring, post-editing, and engine tuning – are not exhaustive, they are representative of many of the skills mentioned in recent works on machine translation pedagogy” (Mellinger 2017: 284). In the light of GenAI and large language models, further helpful qualifications may be needed, such as data analysis, data quality management, data ethics as well as multilingual prompt engineering.

While NMT may diminish the need for raw text production skills, it creates opportunities for translators to develop as “text designers.” To this effect Krüger calls for skills that go beyond text production competences:

Die gerade skizzierte, durch Digitalisierung und Datafizierung des Übersetzungsprozesses geschaffene Situation hat über die tendenziell rückläufige Bedeutung der Textproduktionskompetenz hinausgehende Konsequenzen für die sprach-/kommunikationsorientierten Teilkompetenzen der allgemeinen Translationskompetenz [...]. (Krüger 2018: 117)

‘The situation just outlined, created by the digitization and datafication of the translation process, has consequences for the language/communication-oriented sub-competences of general translation competence that go beyond the declining importance of text production competence.’ (My translation)

Krüger (2018) and Hackenbuchner (Krüger/Hackenbuchner 2022) emphasize the advantages of a translator skill set shift in the face of technological advancements in NMT and GenAI. This shift allows translators to leverage their linguistic expertise for higher-order tasks such as selecting and optimizing MT outputs, alongside a deeper understanding of the target context. Ultimately, this reorientation equips translators to thrive in a digitalized translation landscape, where their role evolves from text producers to architects of effective communication across languages.

Thus, the emphasis of professional translators moves away from production on to the process of translating, thereby increasing their status as experts. In the past, translators were primarily seen as text producers, responsible for translating texts from one language to another. However, as technology becomes more sophisticated, translators are increasingly being called upon to play a more advisory role. Krüger (2018: 126) and Krüger and Hackenbuchner (2022: 403) suggest that translators can now be seen

as “problem solvers” in the field of multilingualism and translation. Their main task is to help clients overcome problems related to translation, such as selecting the right NMT tool for the job, optimizing automated outputs, ensuring the quality of translated texts, etc. In addition to these technical skills, translators also need to have a strong understanding of the translation process and the target context; they must be able to communicate effectively with clients and other stakeholders.

5 Re-organization of competences

The ELIS Report 2024 on the state and developments in the translation industry provides a valuable overview of the current landscape and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. The report identifies four key stakeholder groups: translation companies, freelance translators, in-house translation departments, and translators training institutions. It highlights the different needs and expectations of each of these groups. For example, translation companies are primarily interested in business management, resource allocation, and project management. In-house translation departments are more concerned with organizational issues. Freelance translators focus on time management and productivity. All these competences must be catered for by translator training institutions who additionally must also educate young academics in research skills.

So, instead of focusing exclusively on the production aspect of the translation process, the training of translation experts must incorporate all aspects of translation. The central focus lies in the management of multilingualism, such as for example the organization of a translation service, collecting and managing multilingual data, the fine-tuning of a machine translation system or setting up a terminological database.

While excellent language, cultural, and translation skills remain essential for successful quality evaluation and quality assessment, there is a growing need for comprehensive technological skills. As Krüger and Hackenbuchner (2022) argue in their framework for combined data literacy and machine translation literacy, these skills are essential for translators to keep pace with the ever-changing landscape of translation. In particular, translators need to be able to:

- understand the different types of translation technology and how they can be used to improve the quality of translations;
- use data literacy skills to analyze and interpret data from machine translation systems;
- apply machine translation literacy skills to evaluate the output of machine translation systems and identify errors.

In the wake of TMs and MT software, the need for technological competencies for professional translators to remain on top, if not ahead, of change has never been more evident than it is now. (Doherty 2016: 962)

All this not only for the sake of being able to deliver/produce better translations, but primarily towards developing and strengthening the expert status of translators in advising

and consulting those who need translation services (cf. Sandrini 2022). Consulting, planning, and managing constitute the core skills of experts, and as such are not susceptible to automatization.

Such a shift in the role of translators is creating new opportunities for those who are willing to adapt. Translators who are able to develop the necessary skills and expertise can find work in a variety of settings, translation companies, localization companies, in-house translation departments or freelance.

6 Conclusion

This contribution tried to demonstrate that while large language models (LLMs) hold promise for specific content creation tasks, such as generating marketing copy with clear instructions, the future of translation lies in a human-centered approach that leverages the complementary strengths of human expertise and machine capabilities. As O'Brien (2024) aptly states, "we need to become more comfortable with contradictory standpoints such as, for example, the contention that machines cannot be creative, only humans can, or only a human can produce top quality, acceptable and accurate translation" (O'Brien 2024: 5).

LLMs, despite their impressive language processing and ability to handle certain creative tasks within defined parameters, lack the fundamental aspects of human intelligence as well as that of human translation experts. Their reliance on statistical associations within vast datasets does not translate to a true understanding of the world and consequently of the overall translation process. Additionally, their memory limitations and inability to engage in genuine reasoning and planning restrict their effectiveness in high-level translation tasks. Lecun (2024) highlights these limitations, noting the tendency of LLMs to rely on pre-programmed responses or mimic observed patterns.

Therefore, translators are well-served by focusing on and honing the very abilities that LLMs fundamentally lack, and move from a mere production-oriented focus over to emphasizing their expertise on translation. Translation education programs should prioritize these strengths within their curricula to ensure graduates remain relevant and successful in the evolving translation landscape.

Source text

Planötzenhof (2025): Gasthaus Planötzenhof –
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