Towards an ecologically-valid approach to the study of computer-aided literary translation

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Machine translation (MT) has been used sporadically in the production of literary texts and other creative artefacts. MT outputs have been treated by poets in particular as serendipitously encountered linguistic material that can be manipulated like materials in the plastic arts. In most such cases (see Dibbell 2000; Lee 2011) MT is seen as delivering the kind of non-communicative, foreignizing translation advocated by Benjamin (1923/2012) and Venuti (2008). More recently, the ability to customize statistical (and later neural) engines, the availability of plentiful training data and incremental improvements in MT have emboldened computer scientists to build MT engines that are specially adapted for the 'communicative' (Venuti 2008) translation of literary prose (see, e.g., Chang et al. 2011; Toral and Way 2015; Moorkens et al. 2018; Toral and Way 2018). In these cases the aim is to produce fluent output, and the theoretical touchstone becomes Nida and Taber's (1969) dynamic equivalence. The most recent of these studies have been conducted within an established paradigm that involves the training, testing and evaluation of MT engines, using automatic and human evaluation techniques, and evaluating at sentence level and in experimental settings. Thus far, there have been very few studies of how literary translators themselves use, or could use, MT. In this paper we investigate the use of a commercially available MT system by a highly experienced English-to-German literary translator working on a specially commissioned translation, in his normal environment. We complement our observations with linguistic analysis and a post-task interview, in an effort to achieve a more holistic and ecologically-valid understanding of computer-assisted literary translation than previous studies have allowed. Our analysis focuses especially on translator voice and style (Author(s) 2001; Author(s) 2013, 2018; Taivalkoski-Shilov 2018), and on the translator's own view of the role of machines in literary translation.

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