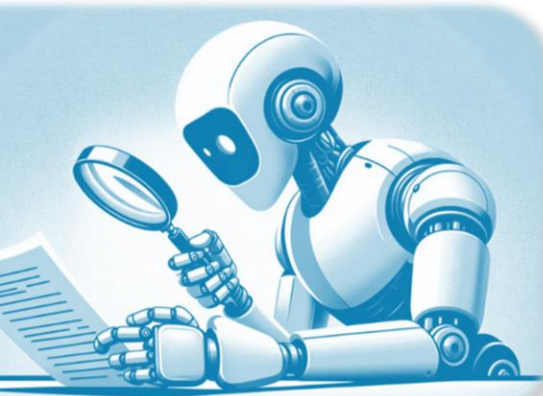


IS AI READY TO TRANSLATE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS?

AI holds much promise as a tool to help companies be more efficient and save money. Translation can represent a substantial chunk of a company's budget, especially since the introduction of [Québec's new Bill 96](#). Recent public awareness of the neural machine translation service DeepL Translate, heralded as the "world's most accurate translator", has many wondering if AI may be a solution for companies looking at reducing their translation expenses in these uncertain economic times.

Many translators have been using automation tools for decades and neural machine translation has been around since 2011 (yep, that's 14 years!), but additional Open AI options like ChatGPT and Google's GNMT system have more recently made the public aware of this potentially attractive solution.



Recently, a client asked me: **"Should we be using AI to handle some of our translation?"**

The short and sweet answer is "No". At least not yet. And not for many years to come.

Granted, as a translation company founder and CEO, one could argue that I am not very objective and that I have vested interest in the answer.

Fair enough. Yet, SDS' DNA is about being a partner to our clients. And knowing everything I know, I would give you the exact same answer if I was working for your company. Let me explain why.

What is translation, really?

Translation is not just about replacing one word in one language with its equivalent in another. It serves as a **cultural bridge** that connects people across societies, backgrounds, traditions and ways of life.

Translation is actually **transcreation**. Everyone knows it takes careful thought, emotional intelligence and cultural understanding to write a good piece in their own language. Translating requires:

- Cultural expertise in both the source and target languages
- Creative adaptation abilities to resonate with the target audiences
- Understanding of context, subject matter, lingo, jargon (technical, legal, etc.) and how to convey it to the intended target
- Preservation of meaning, tone, style and emotional resonance of the original piece
- Detection of implied meanings and cultural references



How does AI translation work?

Every translation AI model is trained on the same datasets. Through the analysis of these datasets, AI translates by **predicting** which word is most likely to be next in a sentence.

It works exactly like the word suggestions when you are typing a message on your phone. Type “See you” and it will trigger “Soon”. That works well. But start typing messages that are a little more complex, and suggestions can become odd, hilarious or downright offensive.

Has AI really improved that much in the field of translation?

Automated translation is nothing new. The first automated translation systems were created in 1933, and many translators have been using CAT (computer-assisted translation) tools since the 60's.

Although Neural (AI) machine translation has been around since 2011, it has only been brought to the forefront in the past 5 years, when DeepL Translate (a tool designed in 2013) was made available to the public, in an effort to widen datasets and improve results.

And improved they have, although not as much as one would think. AI works well for simple text and casual conversation, especially when translating into English. But it still **lacks when it comes to business, subtlety and regional forms of more common languages** (for example, AI cannot translate into Québec French or Mexican Spanish very well).

What can AI translation really do?

Let's give credit where credit is due. AI translation is super convenient when travelling in a foreign country. It allows us to communicate with one another, even bring some chuckles along the ways. It can even help make a web page written in a foreign language mostly understandable.

And when it comes to business?

AI can be used to produce rough drafts in several languages, handle simple repetitive contents, and even correct basic grammar and spelling. It is a tool that can perform simple or repetitive tasks but can't replace a human translator.

That's because AI can't understand many aspects of human language and communication (see list on the right). And it remains extremely inaccurate when it comes to legal, medical, technical or creative documents.

Most importantly, AI **cannot take responsibility for errors or omissions**, and businesses will be liable if inaccuracies generated by AI are not caught.

AI Translation cannot take into account

- Brand identity
- Business etiquette
- Context
- Cultural appropriateness
- Cultural background
- Cultural references
- Emotional resonance
- Empathy
- Feelings
- Homonyms or homographs
- Humour
- Idioms or expressions
- Implied meaning
- Intended impact
- Lingo and jargon
- Local values
- Regional differences
- Social norms
- Style
- Subject matter
- Target audience
- Tone
- Vocabulary level
- ...

Fun Fact

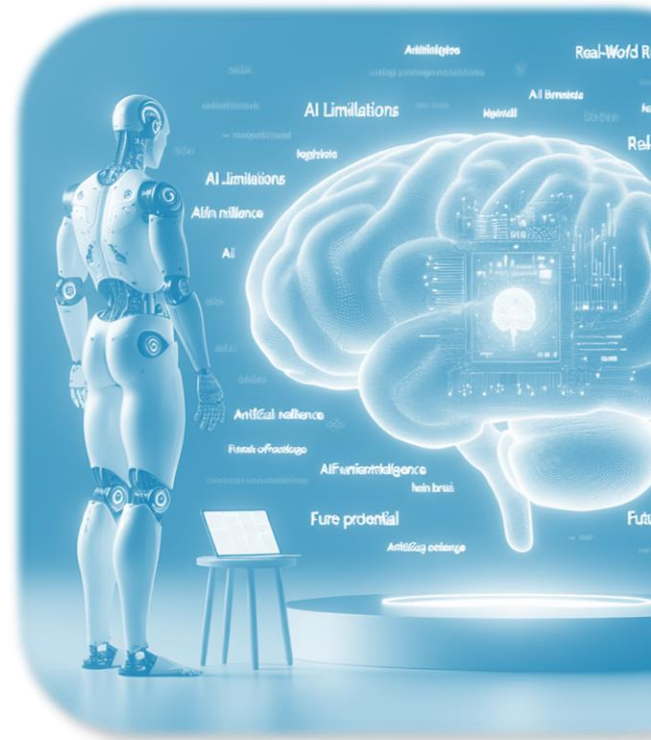
AI is better at translating into English **than into any other language**. That's because English dominates the Internet and datasets are readily available.

In other languages, AI translation does not work as well, especially in languages that are **regionally specific**, like Québec French and South American Spanish.

AI limits

A study carried out in Switzerland (a trilingual French/German/Italian country) on AI translators uncovered the following shortcomings:

- **Lack of originality.** The same generic phrasing is used across many different businesses. Companies using AI lose their **originality** and **brand identity**.
 - **Random translation of homographs** (words spelt the same).
Example: AI randomly translates “Book” as a verb (Book an appointment) or a noun (read a book).
 - **Lack of cultural sensitivity.** AI frequently produces translations that are **wildly inappropriate**.
Example: AI translated “Come alive with the Pepsi Generation” in Chinese as “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave,” causing cultural offence.
 - **Stale vocabulary and robotic phrasing.** AI produces **bland, repetitive and uninspiring content**.
 - **Noticeable grammatical errors and awkward phrasing.** Native speakers/readers notice when AI translation is used, and it **erodes their trust**.
 - **Epic humour fails.** Humour translated with AI becomes a **“You had to be there” moment**.
 - **Lack of adaptation.** AI is **quite literal** and doesn’t stray from the original text.
Example: Imagine translating “Four important words to remember: You are not alone”. AI will keep the number “Four”, whether it translates “You are not alone” with 3, 5 or 6 words.
 - **Lack of understanding of tone, emotion or subtlety.** AI doesn’t roll eyes, chuckle, wink or empathize.
 - **No cultural connection.** A language (and its regional versions) is like a fingerprint: unique, layered and impossible to replicate perfectly. AI doesn’t know (yet) how to translate **idioms** (like “It’s raining buckets”).
 - **No understanding of context.** AI doesn’t **differentiate between legal and technical** documents and therefore doesn’t use appropriate wording.
Example: In the terms and conditions for purchasing a subscription after a trial period, “Am I going to be charged after the trial?” became “Will I be legally charged in Court?” in French.
 - **Random translation of first and last names.** Enough said...
 - **Confidentiality concerns.** Unless used in a closed loop, any material provided to AI is not treated as confidential.
- 



To keep in mind

Since AI uses the Internet to translate, the more erroneous translations created by AI are published online, the more mistakes AI will make, as it also references itself.

Fun Fact

An experienced translator will spend **more time correcting** an AI generated translation than translating a document from scratch.

Although AI has honed its skills over time, it still isn't capable of producing high-quality professional translations. Granted, it can help you understand the gist of a document written in another language. But it can only produce fairly accurate results if the original document is well written, concise and very basic. SDS is here to help you make the best translation decisions for your business. Don't hesitate to contact us with any questions, we will be honoured to share our expertise to find the best solutions for you.

- Stephanie

A bit of fun

Below are some epic machine-generated translation fails we found during our travels. Enjoy!

