

GUEST EDITORIAL—**COMPUTERS AS TRANSLATORS:
TRANSLATION OR TREASON?**

Can machines translate between human languages? And should they be allowed to translate the Bible?

On one level the first question is easily answered. Leaving aside the massive computing power dedicated to machine translation between major languages, everyone with access to the internet can use the Google translator to translate between any pair of fifty-nine different modern languages—with varying degrees of success. Machines are still less adept than human brains at making intuitive leaps and pursuing meaning through inference and contextually based pragmatic deductions. But yes, they can translate. Of course most of the languages we work with in Bible translation do not feature on the Google translator, or any other commercial or free platform. But gifted people within the Bible translation community have been at work on some generic solutions for translation or adaptation of Bible text between languages. As early as the 1980s SIL personnel were working on what was then Computer Assisted Dialect Adaptation—a suite of programs that to some extent emulated the “analysis-transfer-restructuring” translation paradigm of Nida and Taber. Today the two most commonly considered are Adapt It, produced by SIL personnel, and UBS’s Paratext Interlinearizer. Like the Google translator, the results are variable. But the answer can be seen in terms of better technology—more powerful computers and smarter programs.

The second question, however, brings along with it many further questions—ethical, theological, missional questions. What is the nature of the text we are translating? What are the responsibilities of the translator to the biblical source text and its authors, to the commissioners of the translation, to the receptor communities? Can these responsibilities be negotiated by a machine? If mechanical translation is done from one target language to another, what does that say about the status of the source text in its original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek? Does it unfairly privilege the one act of interpretation encoded in the first translation? Does a focus on mechanical translation tend to diminish the human element, and therefore lead to less empowerment of the people of the language communities? Does it ignore the subtle differences between outwardly similar societies?

Computers have moved from being simple word-processors to being resource providers, text manipulators and checkers, and translation environments (using platforms such as Paratext and Translator’s Workplace) and this progress

has been universally welcomed and celebrated. But the degree to which machines should be used to actually *do translation* has been more controversial.

This issue of *The Bible Translator – Practical Papers* brings together contributions from many perspectives on this debate. There are descriptions of what computer programs can do, and discussions of how they have been used, and how they might be used better. And there are questions about fundamental assumptions. Supporters of the use of computers in Bible translation are themselves the sources of most of the practical warnings and suggestions for improvement. Opponents tend to focus on more fundamental questions.

The issue opens with a paper by **Carl Gross** which was in many ways the cause of it all. This paper was submitted some time ago, but it was felt better to hold it over until a broader group of papers on the subject could be put together. Gross's paper introduces the most commonly used programs, and the main issues they raise.

The concept of computer adaptation of Bible text from one language to another is presented and defended by **Bruce Waters**, the author of *Adapt It*. And the fundamental presupposition of translation from anything other than the original biblical languages is questioned by **Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole**.

Descriptions of the workings of Paratext, the Paratext Interlinearizer, and *Adapt It* are provided by some of those most closely involved with the development of those programs: a paper by **Hart Wiens** and **Clayton Grassick** on Paratext was published in this journal in October 2009 but we have taken the opportunity to publish it in updated form here with the illustrations better placed and with additional information on the recently launched Paratext 7.1. **Jon Riding** and **Gerrit van Steenbergen** explain the workings of the Paratext Interlinearizer and **Bruce Waters** describes *Adapt It*.

Finally, descriptions of the use of *Adapt It*, and to a lesser extent, Paratext, in actual adaptation projects are supplied by **Robert Bugenhagen**, **Karl Franklin**, and **John Nystrom**. The last of these has additional points of interest as a multi-language project, and one which is moving from *Adapt It* towards Paratext as its preferred platform.

The contributions from both UBS and SIL personnel to this issue give evidence of the degree of partnership and cross-fertilization which exists between these organizations in the field of computer support for translations.

Clearly much more can be said on this topic and this issue does not intend to close off discussion. *The Bible Translator* welcomes responses to this issue by way of notes, letters, or further articles.

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