

## **Translation in the Age of AI with Lynne Bowker**

Summary by Diana Rhudick

Our keynote speaker was Lynne Bowker, a full professor at the University of Ottawa School of Translation and Interpretation. She presented artificial intelligence, or AI, and machine learning as an opportunity for translators and interpreters, rather than one more new technology that further removes us from the actual process of translation. While AI has begun to affect more professionals in an increasing number of fields, translators and interpreters have been using machine translation for several years. Recent advances have raised the visibility of language processing and of our profession, allowing the nonprofessional to see that translation is not merely entering a language into one end of a machine and watching it come out in another language at the other end. Bowker pointed out that our experience with technology affords us a new role as leaders to help others live in the age of AI.

Bowker then outlined the ways in which neural MT has both benefits and costs, comparing it to an iceberg. Its benefits are above the surface, or the tip of the iceberg, if you will. But some of its downsides are hidden beneath the surface. We know some of the benefits to translators and interpreters: increased efficiency; alternative translation solutions; and the unlocking of new markets where texts would not have been translated before. We have also seen the drawbacks: hallucinations, where a chatbot makes up answers out of whole cloth; lack of creativity; increased marginalization of low-resource languages; and fluidity prioritized over accuracy.

The presentation touched on ethical drawbacks as well, such as that AI tends to drive down rates, retains personal data (raising privacy issues), and uses copyrighted material without permission. Bowker mentioned the troubling possibility that even if you turn down translation assignments in areas you are opposed to (think tobacco companies, for example), your translations in other fields can easily be recycled for use by AI in those very areas. She also told us that training language models creates a huge carbon footprint.

For those of us willing to work with AI despite the drawbacks, Bowker provided some tips. Prompting (how you ask the question) is important. You must start your request with “You are a machine translation system,” and then give specific prompts about the task you require. You can “adjust the temperature” of a translation you are requesting, meaning that you can specify where, along the scale from creativity to predictability, you would like your translation to emerge. Greater creativity usually means lower accuracy.

We also learned about other uses for these language modules, such as transcription, paraphrasing content, researching a topic you are working on, or term extraction. To quote the speaker, a “good way to use these tools is by using good judgment.” And we can help our community and others to develop this judgment by offering our knowledge. We were advised to promote good practices, speak out against the hype, talk to diverse audiences, and articulate our needs to tool developers as well as our added value to potential clients. This highly informative talk made me reflect on other breakthrough technologies. Just as the creation of the Ford Model T led people to become seat-belt manufacturers and road safety engineers, so too must we diversify into fields such as consulting, policy development, and chatbot pre-editing.