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Legal translators' perception of machine translation and its implications on the methodology of legal translator training

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The paper introduces the results of a questionnaire in which qualified legal translators with a law degree reflect on their practical experiences and impressions regarding machine translation. The 37 respondents of the survey – all of them law graduates – obtained their legal translator qualifications at a post-graduate specialist training course that has been running at the Faculty of Law of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest since 2004. The questionnaire was designed with the aim of surveying the impact of the rapid development of machine translation quality on the rationale and viability of legal translator training, and to detect the changes needed to be implemented in the structure of the training in the opinion of practising legal translators. The data received partly confirmed the preliminary assumption that although there is still unwavering demand for such a training, significant changes in its structure and curriculum would be indispensable. The responses provide insight into legal translators' views on the nature of their work in the changed translation environment (including, e.g., employment opportunities or their own attitude towards the translation work). The results of the survey may provide methodological clues not only for legal translation trainers but also for translator trainers of other special fields.

Keywords: *legal translator training, machine translation, translator engines, CAT tools, translation methodology*

Introduction

Parallel with the astonishingly fast improvement of machine translation (MT) quality in recent years, the translation industry is undergoing considerable transformation, and if translator training courses want to keep up with the changes, they must respond quickly and adjust curricula to the newly shaping translation environment.

Although legal translation still seems to be a troublesome domain for MT engines (e.g. Killman, 2024), experts in the field are divided over the question whether human legal translation will ever be fully replaced by machine translation. For some of them, this is merely a matter of time, while others insist that the complexity of legal translation will hardly ever allow the machine to avoid all the pitfalls and tackle the issues inherent in the legal translation process (Šarčević, 1997; Hilal, 2023). There is a long list of characteristics of the legal language that differentiate it from other languages for special purposes, thereby making it extremely challenging to translate, the most frequently quoted obstacle being the system-bound nature of legal terms, which stems from the incongruities between legal systems (combined with the fact that there is no physical reality behind legal concepts to which they can be related). Therefore, during the translation process, in addition to the communicative situation, the translated text must be situated within the given legal framework(s) and the relevant branches of law, and legal translators must often resort to comparative law methods to determine the type and degree of equivalence between legal concepts. For a more detailed description of the topic, see e.g. Šarčević, 1997:244–253; Sandrini, 2018:514-518; Prieto Ramos, 2014:122–124; Engberg, 2013:10–18; Fischer, 2010; Tamás, 2017; Balogh, 2020:25–35.

Accuracy and confidentiality are key issues in legal translation, but machine-translated legal texts can hardly be considered reliable without human intervention. The nature of this intervention, however, is getting to be very different from the set of tasks traditionally

performed by legal translators: simultaneously with the improvement of MT a major shift has occurred in their profiles with the tedious and less-creative post- or pre-editing tasks demanding an increasing share of their work. This also implies that traditional legal translator training methodologies, syllabi, curricula and the focal points of the training must be reviewed, with more attention paid to language technology and technology-related competences better adjusted to the requirements of the market (Kenny, 2020). Such an adjustment raises a lot of questions regarding the structure and methodological priorities of legal translator training. To be able to address the emerging questions, it is crucial to carefully examine the entire context of the translation industry (including all its actors) and to find out how translator trainers and translators themselves feel about their changed role.

With these pressing issues in mind, the author of this paper (also program leader of a post-graduate legal translation training) conducted a survey among practicing legal translators in the summer of 2023 to discover how they see the state of affairs in the special domain of legal translation. The survey was conducted in the hope that the responses would provide some guidance on what changes the translators would find pivotal in the curriculum of a given legal translator training course (more details on the background to the course will be given in the next section of the paper). Indeed, the 37 responses received proved to be highly useful in terms of translator training methodology, in addition to providing interesting and useful insight into the professional experiences of legal translators regarding the nature of the legal translation work in the previously described changing translation environment, including, e.g., employment opportunities or the translators' own attitude towards the work they perform. The results of the survey add a piece to the jigsaw puzzle unveiling professional translators' attitudes to the recent technological changes in the translation industry and are complementary to similar (although not domain-specific) surveys (see e.g. Hunnect, 2021 or Sulyok, 2023.)

Background to the questionnaire – participants and research methodology

All 37 respondents of the questionnaire graduated from the legal translator training courses launched for the first time in 2014 at the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences of PPKE (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest). The training, which was running as a three-semester full-time postgraduate specialist course (in the Hungarian-English language pair), can be considered unique, as it was the first legal translator training course in Hungary hosted by a faculty of law and not a faculty of humanities (as was the general practice). Applicants to the training were supposed to have obtained a legal degree and hold a B2 level language examination in English. In addition to these application criteria, applicants had to take an entrance exam where their reading comprehension and text production skills were tested both in English and Hungarian, whereby, finally, 14-15 participants were selected each year. Participants who passed the final exams successfully at the end of the third semester received a certificate that qualified them as: "Lawyer specialised in legal translation". Regarding quality assurance, it is worth mentioning that the satisfaction index of the training was outstandingly high compared to other post-graduate trainings launched by the faculty.

It is also important to note that at the time of the launching of the training, both trainers and students found personal presence extremely beneficial, as it established team spirit, friendships between students and between trainers and students were formed, which proved to be highly motivating for both parties. However, with the speedy improvement of MT (and also considering the fact that distance learning has become a general practice in the post-COVID times), personal presence might no longer be as important as before, which raises the possibility of switching to online or hybrid training in future.

From the 100 graduates of the past 9 years, 37 returned the questionnaire. Most of the respondents were aged between 30 and 50, with an average age of 41, which correlates with the

fact that they were attending the training after obtaining their legal degrees and (most of them) spending a few years working in the legal profession, while a few years have also passed since they finished the training. The age of the respondents is presented in the table (Table 1) below.

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age group	Percentage
Betw. 20-30	5.5%
Betw. 30-40	40.5%
Betw. 40-50	45.9%
Betw. 50-60	8.1%

Regarding respondents' experience in legal translation, options were given to choose from: undertaking translation assignments 1) regularly, 2) occasionally, 3) translating only for personal purposes and 4) never translating. As can be seen in the table below (Table 2), most of the respondents (almost 46%) undertake translation assignments occasionally, which indicates that they work as legal translators part-time, besides having a main job (most probably working primarily in the legal field). 29.7% of the respondents translate regularly, 21.6% engage in translation merely for personal purposes and there was one respondent who reported to undertake no translation assignments.

Table 2. Respondents' experience in legal translation

Frequency of undertaking translation assignments	Percentage
Regularly undertakes translation assignments	29.7%
Occasionally undertakes translation assignments	45.9%
Translates only for personal purposes	21.6%
Does not translate at all	2.8%

As for the methodology of the research, the instrument of the quantitative data collection was a questionnaire designed in Hungarian, created with Google Forms and sent out electronically to all students who have obtained a certificate as legal translators at the legal translator training course introduced above. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended questions, as well as Likert-scale items. Open-ended questions were used to supplement respondents' answers given to closed questions or Likert-scale choices, and most of them were optional. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed.

Results and discussion

In this section of the paper, respondents' answers will be presented in the same order as they appear in the questionnaire. Responses with the highest relevance to this study will be discussed in more detail.

Frequency of usage of CAT tools and/or machine translation engines for translation

Respondents were asked to choose from 4 options regarding the regularity of the usage of computer assisted (CAT) tools (e.g., translation memories like, e.g., Memoq or Trados) and/or machine translation engines (like, e.g., Google translate or DeepL). More than half of the respondents (55.6%) regularly use both CAT tools and MT engines, while 25% of them use both CAT tools and MT engines occasionally, and 25% use CAT tools and MT engines occasionally for private purposes. Table 3 presents a summary of the responses. More than one option could be selected.

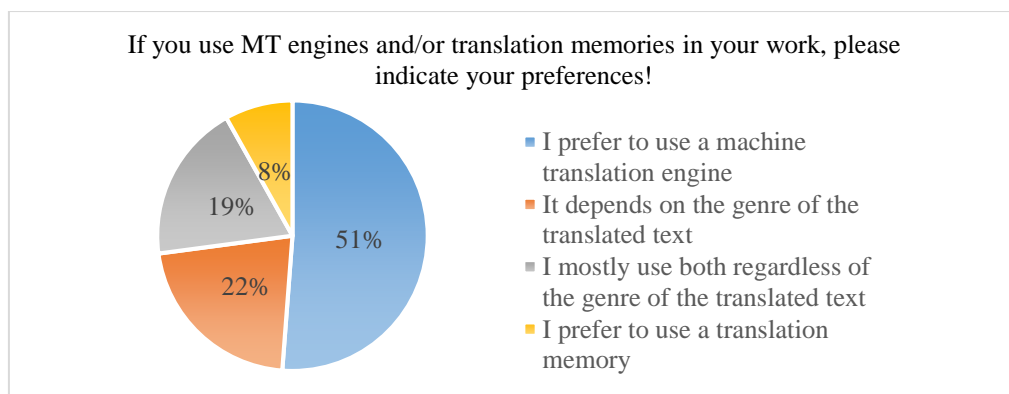
Table 3. Usage of CAT tools and/or MT engines

Frequency of usage	Percentage
I regularly use CAT tools and/or MT engines	55.6%
I occasionally use CAT tools and/or MT engines	25%
I occasionally use CAT tools and/or MT engines when translating for private purposes	25%
I never use CAT tools and MT engines	2.8%

Preferences regarding the usage of CAT tools and machine translation engines

Respondents who confirmed the usage of CAT tools and/or MT tools were asked to indicate their preferences regarding these devices. MT engines were preferred by 51% of the respondents, while only 8.1% preferred to use translation memories. 21.6% of them said their preferences depended on the genre of the translated text, and 18.9% confirmed using both MT engines and translation memories regardless of the genre of the translated text (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Preferences regarding the usage of CAT tools and machine translation engines



It might be presumed that the 8.1% of respondents who preferred translation memories were specializing in translating only a few given legal genres (e.g., contracts) operating with a similar sentence or even text patterns and phraseology, in which case translation memories can be extremely helpful by speeding up the work.

Respondents were also asked whether they experienced any differences between MT engines and those who said yes (64.5%) were asked to name the translation engine they find the best. DeepL Translate was by far the most popular MT engine with 80% of respondents opting for it as the best one, Google Translate and eTranslation were preferred by 5-5% and apparently there was some confusion as to what an MT engine means, as Glosbe and even EUR-lex were also named by some.

Differences in the quality of machine translation regarding the language direction and the genre of the translated text

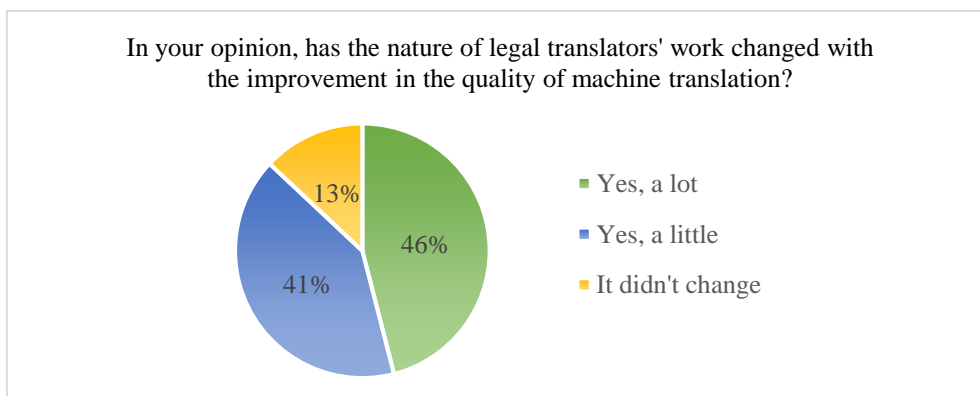
As regards language direction (EN-HU or HU-EN), no difference was found in MT quality by 51.4% of the respondents, while 28.6% of them found that MT quality was better from Hungarian into English. Interestingly though, the ratio of those regarding MT quality better from English into Hungarian was also fairly high, namely, 20%. One optimistic conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that the MT quality of under-resourced languages, such as Hungarian, is also improving fast enough and probably keeping up with widely spoken languages.

As for the genre of the translated text, 67.6% of the respondents thought that genre did not influence MT quality, however, 32.4% of them stated the opposite. Those who thought that genres do have something to do with the quality of MT were offered the option to explain or illustrate their point with examples, and here a summary of their findings is presented: MT quality is better in the case of 1) frequently translated genres, such as, e.g., contracts; 2) EU documents; and 3) texts on international law, while MT quality is worse in the case of 1) less standardized genres, such as, e.g., judicial documents; 2) genres with hugely complex content and complicated sentence structures, such as, e.g., EU Court of Justice materials and 3) texts on civil law.

Changes in the nature of the work performed by legal translators

Next, respondents were asked if they had experienced any changes in the nature of legal translation work as a consequence of MT quality improvement. 87% of them said they did, and 13% of them said they did not. 46% of those experiencing changes stated that legal translators' work had changed a lot, while in the opinion of the remaining 41% it had changed a little. The responses are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Changes in the Nature of the Work Performed by Legal Translators



Respondents who experienced changes could optionally give explicit explanations and examples regarding the nature of the changes. The points listed below represent the changes cited by many, thus, they reflect the general views of most of the respondents. Each point is illustrated with a quotation by a respondent, cited literally:

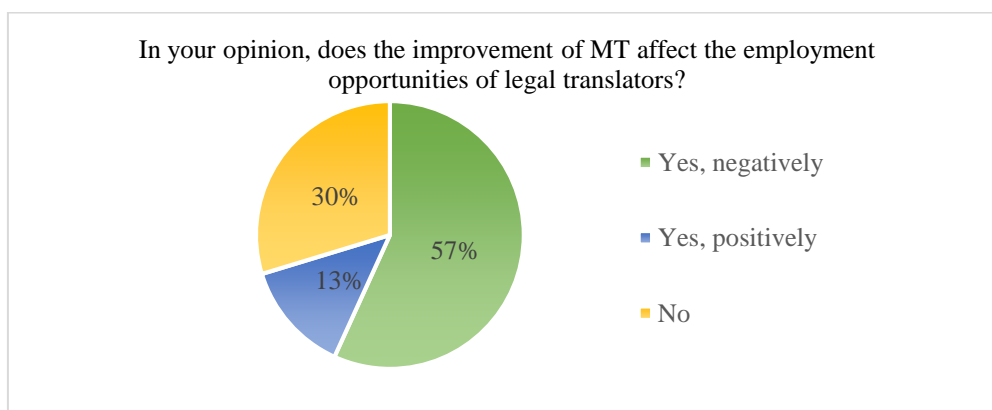
- The speed of the translation process has accelerated. (*"The focus shifted from translation to proofreading, greatly speeding up the pace of work."*)
- There is less work commissioned, and clients tend to be satisfied with lower quality. (*"High-quality work of a particularly high standard is rarely needed, quantity is more important, and MT is very practical for clients due to the usually tight timeframe and cost-optimisation."*)
- There has been a shift in the skills and competences required from legal translators and there is a greater emphasis on post-editing rather than creative work. (*"Often they don't even ask for translation, just proofreading."*)
- There is huge pressure on translators to be more efficient. (*"Translation of a longer text in a given time is expected."*)
- Traditional translator skills are at risk. (*"... as a consequence, active text creation skills are eroded".*)

Nevertheless, there were several views striking optimistic notes and hinting that despite the many challenges, humans cannot be disregarded in the legal translation workflow due to the specific characteristics of legal translation. (“[...] *human legal research work remains very significant. In the case of court materials e.g., the terminology and institutional designations of the relevant legislation must be followed consistently. In this sense, legal translation, by its very nature of being based on thorough research, remains highly personalised.*”)

Changes in legal translators’ employment opportunities

The next question surveyed respondents’ opinions about the employment opportunities of legal translators, and whether they were affected by the fast improvement of MT. This question is closely related to the previous one (on changes regarding the work done by legal translators), consequently, overlaps between the answers given to these two questions could be observed. The answers are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Changes in Legal Translators’ Employment Opportunities



A significant proportion of the respondents, namely 57% said yes, employment prospects were affected negatively; while 13% said yes, positively; and 30% said no. Here again, respondents who answered ‘yes’ were offered the option to elaborate on their answers, and the fact that all of them commented on the topic shows that they are seriously concerned with the issue, which is not surprising: if translation is your bread-winning profession, a lot is at stake. Here again, several correlating thoughts were conveyed, a selection of which is presented below, with opinions about both positive and negative impacts represented.

- Human translators cannot compete with the machine in terms of quantity. (“*If you calculate the remuneration for the work done ‘by sheer volume’, the machine will always beat you.*”)
- Although humans cannot compete with machines in terms of quantity, top-notch quality legal translation can only be prepared by humans. (“*If quality work is needed, human translators will still be hired.*”) (“*Many people think they can use MT. I think we learned to translate during the training, so we can confidently override the machine.*”)
- Unfortunately, many clients tend to be satisfied with lower-quality translation. (“*In-house, many people are content with Google Translate and do not hire a legal translator.*”)
- Some clients are not aware of the risks carried by MT, which stops them from appreciating the work of a conscientious and prepared legal translator. They think they can rule out legal translators and do the translation themselves with the help of MT engines. (“*My father who doesn't speak much English communicates with his clients using DeepL. He doesn't understand why and what I studied for such a long time (for 3 semesters) in the training.*”)

I found quoting this last comment relevant because it reflects the attitude of lay people who do not realize or acknowledge how the pitfalls hidden in legal translation jeopardize the success and authenticity of legal translation. Should this approach get prevalent, it might seriously impact the employment prospects of legal translators.

The answers given to this question reveal that the respondents had been contemplating the situation before and that they still value and are proud of their skills and competences acquired by translator training. In fact, this was reinforced by their answers given to the next question, which asked them if their own attitude to work was affected by the improvement of MT: 54.1%, a relatively high proportion of the respondents answered that it was not affected; 29.7% said it was affected positively; and 16.2% said it was affected negatively.

Legal translators' suggestions for changes in legal translator training

Finally, respondents were asked if they would implement changes in the structure of the legal translator training scheme they attended if they were to enrol in it today. The results in this case came as a surprise, because, in spite of my expectations for everyone suggesting changes, almost 46% of the respondents said there was no need for changes, while the narrow majority, 51.4% opted for implementing changes. One respondent said there would be no need to enrol, as the present circumstances eliminated the rationale for legal translator training. Nevertheless, the proportion of respondents suggesting changes (51.4%) is still large, and the ideas they put forward are genuinely valuable.

In most answers, the relevance of post-editing and problem-solving skills, more IT and language technology are emphasized and some of the respondents propose the idea of introducing a subject covering the interferences and correlations between the disciplines of language and technology. A few (exactly 5) respondents suggest that more ground should be given to grammar. This idea is valid and even crucial in the context of the training in question where participants have legal degrees but typically lack the linguistic background, but it would not be as relevant in the case of a Master-level legal translator training where most attendees come from the domain of humanities with BA-level degrees in linguistics.

There were further interesting comments that were too specific to the training (and its trainers) in question to be discussed here, while there was also a set of relevant views given on the prospects of legal translation, court interpretation, ChatGPT and the regulation of AI in general, which fall out of the scope of this study. However, I would like to highlight an opinion (expressed by several respondents) that seems to counterbalance the trials and tribulations faced by translator training courses under the pressure of the present circumstances and can be considered universally valid for all teaching and training contexts: it is about the personality and authenticity, in other words, the charisma of the trainers, which, by boosting motivation, makes the learning experience enjoyable and enduring.

Methodological implications of the survey results

The suggestions overviewed in the previous section of the study reinforce the preconception that changes regarding the structure and the content of the training (and legal translator trainings in general) are unavoidable and that the changed translation environment enables for the training to be held online or with a hybrid method. Due to the shift in competences (e.g. Prieto Ramos, 2024; Hilal, 2023) required from legal translators, shortening the training time (from 3 to 2 semesters) might also be considered.

After finding out that the majority of the respondents preferred using translation engines rather than translation memories (TMs), the question arises whether classes on the use of TMs (e.g. Memoq or Trados) should be fully replaced by classes on pre- and post-editing machine-translated texts, as well as on quality assurance (Prieto Ramos, 2015). Without doubt, the ratio

and timeslot including classes covering translation-related language technology and reinforcing the competences that have become more relevant (like post-editing) should be carefully deliberated, together with defining and balancing the elements of the changed skillset (e.g. Pym, 2013; Prieto Ramos, 2024) needed for legal translation. As for the know-how of developing translation students' post-editing skills, Kóbor and Szlávik provide helpful functional methodological advice backed by survey-results (Kóbor, 2023; Szlávik, 2023; Kóbor–Szlávik, 2024).

Regarding the skillset needed to be acquired by legal translation trainees, distinction must be made between graduate and postgraduate training programs. As mentioned before, the priority given to linguistic competence versus subject-matter competence depends on the type of degree awarded by the training (MA or post-graduate). The ratio of lessons focusing on soft skills as opposed to hard skills is also subject to the type of training: soft skills (e.g., negotiation techniques, time-management, cooperation or teamwork) are less relevant in post-graduate trainings where attendees usually arrive equipped with some work experience, having at least partly acquired such skills. In this case, priority should be given to hard skills (i.e. competences that can directly be applied in the actual translation process), even more so, because participants who are typically working adults are especially sensitive to time spent inefficiently, let alone, wasted. Conversely, in the case of MA students, soft skills are just as important as hard skills if the aim of the training is to prepare them for real life and survival in the translation market.

Conclusions

The results of the survey gave useful insight into how legal translators experience and evaluate the changes brought about by the dramatic improvement of machine translation quality. As the respondents to the questionnaire are practicing legal translators, their views are authentic and as such, are safe to be considered and relied on by all legal translator trainers who would like to adapt translation training to the trends ongoing in the translation industry. Furthermore, the answers also reveal the changes that have occurred in the attitude of clients as a result of MT quality improvement – which, in my opinion, is a relevant point that definitely needs further investigation.

It could be seen that the answers were sometimes contradictory, which is logical when taking into account the complexity and diversity of legal translation and the large scope of legal translation scenarios: after all, the work patterns of legal translators are influenced by various individual circumstances, such as, e.g., working full time or part time, translating for only a few or several clients, for the same set of clients or a varied clientele, working with the same or different legal genres, being self-employed or employed by a firm, etc..

On a final note, the results of the survey confirm that human participation in the legal translation process remains unavoidable (at least for the time being) and that there is still a strong rationale for legal translator training, albeit with a few adjustments implemented in the curriculum regarding the timeframe and the method (online or onsite) of training, the ratio of using TMs versus MT engines and also the ratio of soft versus hard skills, with special emphasis placed on post-editing. The issue of evaluation and testing must also be addressed. The number of competent legal translators may decline in future, partly because the increasing competition calls for par excellence performance, and partly because – due to the changing circumstances and job profile of legal translators – a decrease might be expected in the number of those who choose to pursue the profession.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to all those who took the time and effort to fill in and send back the questionnaire. I found the answers tremendously insightful, the process of assessing them rewarding and illuminating, and the results hugely beneficial.

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