



Open letter to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement about machine translation software

ATIO expresses serious concerns with the use of automatic machine translation software that will be placed in the hands of Government of Canada employees without revision by language professionals.

Ottawa, March 18, 2016

The Honourable Judy M. Foote
Minister of Public Services and Procurement
11 Laurier Street
Place du Portage, Phase III,
Floor 18A1
Gatineau, Quebec
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Dear Minister Foote,

The Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario (ATIO) is the oldest professional association of translators, interpreters and terminologists in Canada. Founded in 1920, our mandate is to provide a collective voice for language professionals in Ontario. In 1989, the *ATIO Act* granted reserved title to our Certified members.

We are writing to voice our concern about the machine translation (MT) tool known as Portage being rolled out to federal government employees. ATIO is of the view that this initiative poses a serious risk to the effective use of both official languages within the public service, and may have serious repercussions on the Government of Canada's official language responsibilities toward the public. Although this tool is intended for only limited informal exchanges and for internal use, we feel it is naïve to believe this will be the case in practice.

High-quality professional translation comes at a cost, and in an era of cost reduction across departments, the widespread roll-out of this tool will inevitably undermine the high standards of both internal and external communications that Canadians have always demanded. Canada may well see its reputation for excellence in oral and written communication in both official languages tarnished as a result, both here and abroad.

At its 2015 Annual General Meeting in Ottawa, ATIO invited Roland Kuhn, the technical expert for Portage, as our guest speaker. His message was clear: machine translation is a tool to be used by professionals. As with any machine translation program, output needs to be reviewed and refined by professionals. In its current form, the proposed roll-out is contrary to the express advice of the Portage tool developers.

We were relieved to learn that the strings produced by MT will be revised by language professionals in the Translation Bureau every few months, but are concerned that such revision may be too little, too late. As it stands now, the tool will be put into the hands of untrained, often unilingual users, who will be unable to determine if the text in the target, translated language conveys the same meaning and tone as the original source language text. Proper grammar, syntax, context and meaning are often sacrificed in machine translation. What's more, MT can produce results that may seem adequate to an untrained user when in fact the tone and meaning of a text has been altered, sometimes significantly. A user who has not fully mastered the source and/or target language may not even be aware that this has happened. This could even lead to legal consequences, in that both languages are considered equally valid under the law.

In addition, the idea that all public service employees will become pop-up translators is an affront to the language professionals who have trained and are specialized in the various fields of human endeavour reflected within the Federal government.

In the hands of a highly-qualified professional, translation can even go so far as to improve the source text by correcting errors, eliminating ambiguities and more. Any such benefits of translation will be lost through the proposed use of this tool by non-professionals. Human experience and expertise, and the instinct for the “not juste” are qualities that cannot be mechanically reproduced.

The Translation Bureau was once at the vanguard of the effort to ensure the effective use of both official languages within the Federal public service by promoting language quality and respect for the work done by translation professionals. Our members' ability to earn a living has already been severely impacted by current market conditions. Many Translation Bureau employees fear their livelihood could be threatened. Attrition levels at the Bureau have been a serious cause for concern, with staffing levels dropping 31%, from 1,928 in 2010 to 1,324 in 2015. By 2018, 138 additional positions will disappear through “attrition” or “non-renewal” of contracts. Already, a large proportion of the work traditionally done in-house has been given to freelancers, independent professionals or agencies, with relatively little effort being put into quality control. Professional translators, interpreters and terminologists are facing a very uncertain future. The decision to roll out this tool is viewed as a complete disregard for language professionals and leads some to believe that the quality of communications is no longer important to the Federal government.

Our members are further concerned about the short and long-term impact that the implementation of machine translation technology within the federal public service will have on the Government of Canada's compliance with the main aims of endowing equal status to French and English and the equality of rights and privileges in terms of their use in federal institutions as set out by the *Official Languages Act*.



More than 85% of federal government translation is into French. Considering the volume of translated information and documents for use by Francophones, it would seem all the more important to ensure translation quality. The standard of French used within the public service has already deteriorated. The machine translation tool that is slated for release may compound this further and, in addition, discredit the Translation Bureau and the profession as a whole.

A machine translation tool strings words together without truly accounting for the spirit of the source or target languages. A tool does not, for example, take into account that French tends to use active voice, while English often uses the passive voice. The survival of French culture itself may be undermined.

Our members are well aware of the benefits that technology can bring and MT is indeed an invaluable tool which helps to save time, money and harmonize terminology. We recognize that the Translation Bureau has already been able to reduce costs as a result of integrating MT into the workplace of professional translators, allowing them to produce more, differently. However, in the hands of unilingual users, it will only serve to perpetuate language errors and confusion as to the appropriate use of terminology.

Everyone hears about the high cost of translation, but too often we overlook the invaluable benefit of having two official languages.

To ensure that communication in both official languages is always of the highest possible quality, we recommend that a team of language professionals be established in each department and agency, that will be responsible for revising all machine-translated communications within a reasonable timeframe. It is our understanding that Global Affairs Canada has already introduced such a mechanism—with a one-hour turnaround time, and on a 24/7 basis—for certain communications. It therefore seems quite feasible to implement, to ensure that every machine-translated email, every communication of any kind, would be revised by a qualified language professional before it is sent out.

A model like this is not unprecedented. At one point in its history, the Translation Bureau was decentralised, with professional translators inside each department and agency. Proximity to clients enabled language professionals to absorb the same organisational culture and ensure better quality translations.

We hope you will take serious note of our concerns and review the real cost of implementing a machine translation tool that, if used without professional supervision, will at the very least diminish the quality of internal government communications and could have much more serious consequences.



We also hope you will consider our suggestion with respect to an organizational structure that would allow each text to be properly revised by a qualified, specialized language professional, thereby ensuring high-quality communications in both official languages, now and in the future, to the benefit of the Government of Canada and all Canadians.

It is our understanding that, at the time of writing this letter, the final evaluation of the MT pilot project had not been released. Once available, we would appreciate receiving a copy, and would be more than happy to offer feedback from the vantage point of the language professions.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to discuss any of these points in further detail.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Carter.' The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lisa Carter, C. Tran. (ES-EN)
President

cc.

The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Heritage
Mr. Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages
Ms. Donna Achimov, Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau
Ms. Emmanuelle Tremblay, President, Canadian Association of Professional Employees
Mr. Greg Fergus, MP for Hull-Aylmer
Ms. Eva Nassif, Certified Translator (EN-FR) and MP for Vimy

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