

Rage against the machine translation

by Tony Beckwith © 2001

I'D JUST FINISHED A TRANSLATION that kept me up for a couple of nights, and I was feeling light-headed and punchy. Then the phone rang, and I let them talk me into another project.

There were two bulky stacks of papers, bulldog clips straining at the top. Photocopies of newspaper articles, hundreds of them, from a faraway land. No idea how many words there were in those stacks, but the translation was needed the day after tomorrow. A brutal marathon. But an excellent price. As I said, I was feeling punchy.

It was late on the second night, which was now four nights in a row with far too little sleep. I sat peering at my screen, eyeballs poaching in pools of lava, optic nerves like tracer bullets vanishing into the black void. The words came stumbling slowly, heavily, clumsily, up from the darkness and into the light. The room suddenly shuddered, like a ship run aground. I noticed a throbbing immediately beneath my left eyebrow, and as I turned my head, blinking, I almost bumped into somebody coming up on my left. He sprang back and smiled, then spoke a few words in a language I couldn't understand. I said, "Excuse me?" He held up a thick stack of papers and said, "Tra-a-sle-chon?"

I nodded and held up my own bulky stacks. He smiled even more broadly and pointed at the sign over the door we were facing. "OK," he said, and walked on through. The sign said *Ministry of Translation*. I stepped over the threshold and saw several other doors across the room, one with a sign that said: "Hispanic Province."

Beyond the door was a tunnel that led to a cavernous hall with an immensely high arched ceiling supported on gray-green metal girders that

looked like butterfly wings. A watery light from somewhere else filtered through the grimy panes of glass above; it looked as though it was getting ready to rain. There were teller's windows all around the walls, each one with brass bars and a number across the top. People were coming and going from the windows in silence, handing in large discs, or collecting them and walking away. I saw that I also had a large disc in my hand and on it was written, in large letters, *1638-H/E-L*. The window nearest me was *79-H/P-T*, so I started walking in the direction of the number on my disc. It seemed to be the thing to do.

As I walked I noticed that some of the people around me were machines—that is, they were those amazing new models from robotics, but really high quality ones, you can tell. Actually, now that I looked more carefully, there were lots of them around, far more than I remembered. And of course they were all dressed in everything imaginable, since they were *machine translators*, or *mach-Trans* as we call them. I'd seen a few of the earlier models here and there, usually at Zodiac Eleven Conferences, but I'd never seen such a large crowd of my new mach-peers all together.

I finally found *1638-H/E-L* and got in line. The person in front of me turned around and I saw that she was an exquisitely crafted *mach-Tran* wearing jeans and a pea jacket. She smiled and a movie played briefly in her eyes. I was enchanted. "Literally traductions?" she enquired. It took me a second but then I got it and said,

"Yes, I do literary translation. Poetry. And you?"

"Me too also!" she beamed. "Looky, Pamblo Nehru!" She reached into an inner pocket of her jacket and pulled out some worn sheets of paper. "Paper!" she exclaimed proudly, and showed me her translation. It was the most appalling piece of work I'd ever read in my entire life, an insult to poets and their readers everywhere. I wept and she misunderstood and said warmly, "Thanks to you. Yours teardrop to comma a movement at it the waiting room."

When at last I stood at the window, I looked through the bars at the machine's head silhouetted against the light coming from the domed ceiling of his booth. He was a *Mach-prO*, one of the *machine translators* working for the Ministry. These guys were the latest thing. I cleared my throat. "Good evening, I'm here to deliver my translation."

The *Mach-prO* slid his long fingers through the bars and wriggled them. "Lessee," he whispered. He pulled my disc up to his face and scrutinized it closely. "Hhmmm." He slipped it into a slot

beneath the windowsill and watched a screen I couldn't see. Suddenly he winced, then pursed his lips and shook his head, frowning. "Like a people!" he screeched. "Basic in never un-what-we-say." He handed me my disc and a receipt in an envelope and said, "Revisionated morning by morning!" He nodded sharply. "Next in lineal."

I said "Thank you" and "Until tomorrow" as always, and turned away. I walked to the end of the section and heard a phone ring. I looked to my right and saw a picture of my office. The phone on my desk was ringing. I answered. The videoscreen flickered and my wife appeared. "Hi," she said. "You look as though you just woke up." ★

