

# CREATIVE Thinking:

## Doing What a Machine Cannot

By Grant Hamilton

**I once spotted this** sentence in a promotional brochure for a small town in the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec, Canada:

*Arpentez la rue principale et découvrez la nature amicale et chaleureuse des résidents.*

Pretty straightforward, I thought. A piece of cake to translate: “Stroll the main street and discover how warm and friendly the local residents are.” Then I began to wonder how a machine translation program would do on a simple translation like this. There was only one way to find out—give it a spin.

**First up, SDL freetranslation.com:** “Traverse the principal street and discover the friendly and warm nature the residents.”

Hmmm. Where did that “traverse” come from, and when was the last time anybody talked about a “principal” street? And what about “the

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residents” just tacked on the end? Overall, a big disappointment.

**Second try, Wordlingo:** “Survey the principal street and discover friendly and cordial nature residents.”

Well, at least we got rid of “traverse,” but “survey” does not sound much better. When I read the French, I get the distinct impression that people are walking up and down the street, not just surveying it. And those “nature residents” sound a bit suspicious. Plus, we still have a “principal” street.

**Next up, Babelfish:** “Survey the main street and discover friendly and cordial nature residents.”

This is an improvement. We are now on the main street, not the principal street. But it is still peopled with “nature residents.”

**Fourth, Promt:** “Survey the main street and discover the friendly and warm nature of the inhabitants.”

Not bad! Notice, though, how we are still surveying the street. Plus, none of these applications seem to consider switching “the friendly and warm nature of the inhabitants” to “how friendly and warm the inhabitants are.” A piffling point?

**Fifth, Apptek:** “Survey the main street and discover the ➡

friendly and cordial nature of the residents.”

This is the best so far, in my opinion. I prefer a street with residents to a street with inhabitants.

**And for the grand finale, Google Translate:** “Stroll the main street and discover the warm and friendly nature of residents.”

At last, a stroll down the main street! The only thing that appears to be missing is exactly which residents we are talking about; the ones who live on the street or all residents everywhere. In any event, Google wins.

So how did the actual living, breathing translator word the text? Like this:

“Soak up the cozy friendliness of small-town Québec with a walk through the old town.”

Wow. I like it a lot. It does not say quite the same thing as the French, but I think that may be why I like it.

Think about it: English-speaking visitors to this town are not quite the same as the French-speaking ones. They have different perspectives and expectations. They notice different things. So maybe you should say different things to them. They will want to “soak up” the atmosphere—the unique architecture, the quaint shops, the way everything looks and feels a little bit different. They also probably appreciate strolling around picturesque “old towns.”

On the other hand, you are unlikely to impress or attract many French-speaking tourists by promising that they will experience “small-town Québec.” Many of them probably already live in a small town in Quebec. “Old town” is also a miss for

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## Be aware of the areas where machine translation capabilities are the strongest and where they are weakest.

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the same reason. So you attract this target audience by saying that they can shop and meet friendly people. The human translator realized these differences and adjusted the text accordingly. He or she added value by doing what no machine translation program could ever do: think creatively. And Google Translate, as impressive as it was, was no match.

### Added Value: The Future of Translation

The more technical and specialized your field of work, the better machines will get at doing exactly what you do, only faster. The exponential growth of computing power and the sharing of human knowledge through tools like Google Translate guarantee it. To earn and keep your place in the field, you must be able to do what computers cannot.

Computers cannot actually think. They cannot take a jargon-filled government report and turn it into seamless, reader-friendly copy. They cannot add a flourish of style where one is needed. They cannot know when the target audience has changed. Even if you fed a computer program this information, it would not know what to do. But you, a smart translator, can do all that.

“But I never translate about soaking up small-town ambience.”

Never translate travel texts? No matter—opportunities to think and be

creative arise in the most unlikely places. For example, here is a quote from a dry-as-dust brief on the provision of municipal recreational services:

*Les temps sont venus de privilégier un mode de gestion des infrastructures innovant, basé d'une part sur la connaissance, la planification, la performance et, d'autre part, sur la mobilisation, la concertation, le partenariat.*

The passage above looks like something a translator could zip right through. A quick translation would sound something like this: “The time has come to favor an innovative infrastructure management mode based on knowledge, planning, and performance on the one hand and on mobilization, cooperation, and partnership on the other.” Our best performer from the last test, Google Translate, suggests this translation: “The time has come to favor a management infrastructure innovative, based in part on knowledge, planning, performance and, secondly, on the mobilization, policy dialogue, partnership.” In reality, these two versions are not hugely different. Google Translate put the word “innovative” in the wrong spot, forgot the word “mode,” and struggled with the definite article (The mobilization? Which mobilization?), but these are things that a posteditor can rectify in a snap.

But read the sentence again and ask yourself what it means. What is an infrastructure management mode “based on performance”? What is the author talking about? Why has the author listed six things that the management mode is based on, but grouped them into threes (based on x, x, and x on the one hand and on x, x, and x on the other)? These are questions a thinking translator might ask. A computer program would not.

The real, live human who translated this text had read the entire brief on recreational services. She knew that “management mode” referred to how creatively and cooperatively town recreational managers did their jobs. She also noticed that the first three “bases” of the management mode were things the managers could do themselves, and that the second three were things the managers could get others to do. This is the translation she suggested:

“The time has come to be innovative facility managers, planning ahead and drawing on our know-how and ability while also securing the cooperation, involvement, and partnership of others.”

Which translation do you think the client will prefer?

### **Developing Your Creative Fluency**

It is an incontrovertible fact that tomorrow’s successful translators will be beloved not for their huge store of technical knowledge, but for their nimble style, effortless fluency, and ready grasp of the communication objective at hand. Whether specialists or generalists, these professionals will be sought out for their ability to read and understand a text and render it in reader-friendly prose in the target language. They will add value that no computer can. ➔

## **Professional Opportunities for Developing Creative Fluency**

**April 30-May 1, 2011**

**ATA Translation Company Division**  
Business Conference  
Embassy Suites at the Chevy Chase Pavilion  
Washington, DC  
[www.atanet.org/tcd\\_business](http://www.atanet.org/tcd_business)

**May 7, 2011**

**New England Translators Association**  
15th Annual Conference  
Boston, MA  
[www.netaweb.org](http://www.netaweb.org)

**May 13-15, 2011**

**National Association of Judiciary  
Interpreters and Translators**  
NAJIT 32nd Annual Conference  
Hilton Hotel  
Long Beach, CA  
[www.najit.org](http://www.najit.org)

**August 12-14, 2011**

**First Annual “Style in Translation” Training Conference**  
Sugar Maples Center for Creative Arts  
Maplecrest, NY  
[www.translateinthecatskills.com](http://www.translateinthecatskills.com)

(Note: Although geared toward English-to-French and French-to-English translators, this event will also be valuable to those who wish to work on their English writing skills in a translation context.)

**October 26-29, 2011**

**ATA 52nd Annual Conference**  
Marriott Copley Place  
Boston, MA  
[www.atanet.org/conf/2011](http://www.atanet.org/conf/2011)

These are the skills you need to improve today to prepare for the road ahead. There are many ways to do this. Attending professional conferences and taking advantage of other continuing education opportunities, such as the ones listed on page 17, bring you into contact with other professionals who can help you hone your craft and add real value to your work. In order to leverage your talents further, you should also be aware of the areas where machine translation capabilities are the strongest and where they are weakest.

Another simple thing you can do is

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to read extensively and diversely in your target language. It also helps to view yourself as the reader's advocate—the person who cuts through dense prose and makes the mental effort to understand and communicate the content and purpose of the text. (A

simple rule I follow is to rewrite for clarity if I cannot imagine having written the sentence myself.) Focusing on your translation style is worth the effort, because as your style improves, so will your confidence and your success as a translator.

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