AI Voices

CIOL Voices
AI and Translation

A CIOL White Paper on the future
for languages and linguists

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Introduction

Since the advent of Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools in the 1980s and 1990s, translators have been adapting to technology in translation. This began with Translation Memory (TM) software and then evolved to Machine Translation (MT), with the 3rd generation Neural Machine Translation (NMT) becoming an increasingly common part of translation workflows.

Therefore, for many in our profession, the hype or buzz surrounding the latest developments with Large Language Models (LLM) or Generative AI (GenAI) such as ChatGPT and their potentially transformational effects may feel familiar.

The future impact of these tools on the translation industry remains uncertain. The latest survey from the Association of Translation Companies (ATC) indicated that 25% of their members are using LLMs and other GenAI tools, compared to 82% using TM and 71% using MT. Some of the primary use cases for GenAI tools currently appear to be content creation, data cleaning, and post-editing. We are still in the early stages of adapting to these new technologies, but it seems inevitable that their use and the associated impacts will grow clearer and more widespread.

As I explore Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance and regulation, I find myself particularly drawn to the EU AI Act, the US Executive Order on safe use of AI, and the discussions held at the UK AI Safety Summit in London (see references). These initiatives represent significant strides in establishing comprehensive frameworks for the responsible development and use of AI.

The EU AI Act, for instance, proposes a risk-based approach to AI regulation, focusing on data quality, transparency, human oversight, and accountability. Similarly, the US executive order establishes new standards for AI safety and security, protecting privacy, advancing equity and civil rights, and promoting innovation and competition. The recent UK AI Summit brought together governments, leading AI companies, civil society groups, research experts, tech companies and thought leaders to discuss the risks of frontier AI and how they can be mitigated through internationally coordinated action.

These developments are highly relevant to professional bodies like the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), as they provide valuable insights into how we can shape our position on AI and the consequent advice we give to the profession, members and stakeholders. As Chair of CIOL Council, I am keen to support the institute as it navigates this complex landscape.

I believe that our position should not only provide reassurance to linguists, especially professional translators of their role in a world influenced by GenAI, but also clearly flag the issues and concerns, offering practical guidance on how to work best with this latest transformative technology.

CIOL will soon be conducting a survey among its members to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of these technological shifts. The insights obtained will be pivotal in gauging the real-world effects of the most recent technological advancements.

As a Royal Chartered body, CIOL is here to represent and act in the best interests of the entire translation profession and industry, and indeed the wider profession of linguists.

It is clear that transparency, safety, and ethical considerations should be at the forefront of our approach. We will advocate for these principles in our thinking and advise on the use of AI in translation and language services and we will encourage our members and language professionals to do the same.

I believe that language practitioners have a confirmed record of resilience and successful adaptation in adapting to technological advancements. We have learned to adjust to previous tech introductions and can apply those lessons as we navigate the world of AI. By embracing this resilience and leveraging our collective knowledge and experience, we can ensure that linguists remain at the forefront of AI integration in our field – the essential expert 'humans in the loop'.

Steve Doswell
Linguist, consultant and Chair of CIOL Council

Technology isn't new to translators – but the risks to jobs, personal data and safety are very real

Translation has long been a tech-enabled sector – we have been using various forms of algorithm since the 1980s. Recently, we have seen a fusion of machine translation (MT) and enhanced AI, which has allowed us to work more efficiently and accurately. In fact, it feels like we've been living in the future for the past 5-10 years.

It's important that bodies like the Chartered Institute of Linguists acknowledge that AI is happening and is not going away. However, linguists still need to be skilled, trained and knowledgeable; and the human contribution in judgement, skill, context, culture and oversight of what a machine can produce should be highlighted.

AI-powered tools can help translators work more efficiently and accurately, and even suggest translations with different emphasis. AI is a powerful research tool for translators. However, there are very real risks - it's important to note the dangers inherent in exposing sensitive texts to AI, including data protection and sensitive personal, health and legal information.

The EU AI Act's provisions direct that use of AI should be restricted when it comes to decisions affecting human safety and wellbeing. These are a step in the right direction. We should encourage translators and translation companies to highlight and refer to government regulation (where this exists) to ensure that we are promoting as well as following best practices.

Despite the rise of AI, the 'human language specialist' does need to remain at the centre of the process, but roles are changing. For example, I have worked for many years on translating scripts for TV, working with actors as Voiceover Director on pronunciation, pauses, etc. In 2018, I worked onsite with the actors. During Covid, I moved to working online with the actors in a virtual recording studio. But now the world has changed… In 2023, I am still in a virtual studio, but no longer with a human actor. Instead, I give feedback on how the AI 'talks' and provide feedback to an algorithm.

As we move forward, I'm certain that there will be a trend towards people becoming language consultants and not solely translators.

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AI poses big questions for the respect of cultures, access and inequality

It's undeniable that AI is progressing at an unprecedented pace, creating a buzz that goes beyond mere hype. However, I can't help but notice that a significant portion of AI's inner workings remain shrouded in mystery, with processes that are unclear and actors who remain unidentified.

One of my major concerns is the apparent lack of cultural nuance in AI development. It seems to me that the major players in this field often overlook the subtleties and complexities of different cultures. This oversight, I believe, leads to inflated and often unrealistic claims about what AI is capable of.

Another observation I've made is that AI development is heavily skewed towards a Western mindset, primarily catering to affluent societies. This creates a stark digital divide where individuals from less privileged backgrounds lack access to the necessary technology and knowledge to fully utilise AI.

I'd argue that due to these access issues, the democratisation of AI remains a distant dream. The dominance of major languages in AI development creates an imbalance, leading to the underrepresentation of smaller languages, cultures, and populations. This situation further underscores the perceived hierarchy among languages, where some are seen as more valuable than others.

Despite these challenges, I see a silver lining. There are potential opportunities in AI, particularly for translators and interpreters working with less common languages. I've seen how AI has been integrated into client workflow processes. This shows me that while AI has its flaws, it also holds immense potential if we can navigate its complexities with care and consideration.

Vasiliki Prestige
Translator, interpreter and CIOL Council member

'Humans in the Loop' – linguists as expert consultants

With the advent of Generative AI along with the ongoing progress of Neural Machine Translation, we are starting to reassess how translators spend their working day and the tools they use. AI is an amazing research tool that can help propose translations with different emphasis. Some language service providers are even thinking about how AI could help with quality evaluation checks for translated texts.

We should not forget however that professional translators already have highly technology-enabled working environments provided by translation memory, supported by machine translation where appropriate – all fully under the control of a professional human linguist in a single working environment.

As AI continues to evolve, it's becoming increasingly clear that it has the potential to revolutionise the translation industry. AI-powered tools can help translators work more efficiently and accurately. However, it's important to remember that AI is just one tool in the translator's toolbox.

The human expert is still essential to providing the high linguistic quality that all clients deserve.

The ways in which technologies develop will change the way we work forever, but I predict that the human professional will stay at the heart of the translation process - just with another, amazing, different, tool to help. Sometimes it will be appropriate to use AI to help, other times it won't.

But I do wonder what professional translators will call themselves in 10 years' time? Terms like 'Expert in the Loop' or 'Human in the Loop' are bandied around, but I think 'Consultant Linguist' captures the expertise and added value we bring as specialists in languages and culture.

Mark Robinson
Translator, translation company owner and CIOL Council member

Buyers, the public and early career linguists will all need education and support

Change is inevitable and we can't hold back the tide. Machines can't (yet) do context, exercise judgement or understand cultural sensitivities; they literally don't know what they're doing. To convey this message to buyers of translation and other language services, we need to counter the wide assumption that machines are naturally better than humans (and cheaper) and educate the wider population on risks and costs.

Translators and interpreters still need to know what they're doing in order to know what the machines are or are not doing. We need to maintain the rigour of linguistic training for an activity [translation] that is likely only to be the 'foundation' to the activities the professionals of tomorrow will actually be doing. We need to persuade future languages students of the need to know the 'nuts and bolts' when the machines keep improving, much like the ability to read a map when every car has a satnav.

We will also need to look at the scope for translators to diversify and how to help them in their early careers. We need to find new ways to convey the breadth of skills and experience a translator or language professional needs to new entrants, to enable them to come through their early years while they build up their skills and experience.

As a professional body, the Chartered Institute of Linguists should be proactive on AI and support members in navigating this fast-changing world. We cannot ignore it, and it will be to the benefit of all to be proactive in talking about AI – including acknowledging what we know and what we don't as the pace of change is faster than anyone can master with 100% certainty.

Emma Gledhill
Translator and languages specialist in multinational company and CIOL Council member

The most 'human' skills will be the most valuable

The advent of ever greater digital automation is revolutionising the working landscape for individuals and within organisations. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude and Bing Chat, are now capable of generating compelling content quickly and effortlessly. This shift in the ways content can be generated has profound implications for the field of languages and localisation.

While the scale of impact on translators and interpreters is still open for debate, the rise of AI will clearly present both challenges and enormous opportunities for linguists working within companies, the professions, international organisations, governments and the armed forces among others. The rapid pace of change necessitates that linguists within organisations will have to continually update their skills and keep trying new tools, to stay abreast of this very dynamic fast-changing environment.

'Meta skills', which are not easily replicated by technology, are also becoming increasingly important in this context. These include classic 'human' skills like creativity, problem-solving, and effective interpersonal communication. However, the advent of AI also promotes other skills like adaptability, rapid innovation, trialling, testing and 'learning by doing'. Also vital is the ability to 'ask the right questions' and paying attention to detail – to spot AI 'hallucinations', errors and omissions.

Learning and using languages inherently develops these meta skills. As we know, languages enhance cognitive abilities, broaden cultural awareness and foster adaptability. In an uncertain future, linguists who continue to learn and grow can expect to find ample opportunities to utilise their language skills.

As we move forward the ability to 'ask' and 'task' AI will become an essential skill, and aptitude in and with languages will play a crucial role in this. Generative AI is now demonstrating to us all that languages are the ultimate human 'meta skill', not just a means of communication. Languages are the tool we use for understanding, codifying and navigating our world – and increasingly, via Large Language Models, and Generative AI, to shape our future.

John Worne
Chief Executive Officer
Chartered Institute of Linguists

Critical language barriers: Understanding the role of online translation tools in high-stakes professional sectors

Online machine translation tools like Google Translate (and Generative AI) are widely available and hugely popular. These tools are also socially and ethically complex. On the one hand, they support linguistic diversity and increase access to information. On the other, these tools can be inaccurate, so they are inherently risky

The low cost and convenience of this technology are nevertheless highly appealing, so machine translation is now present even in high-stakes contexts. Official reports show that these tools are used to interview refugees, to communicate with patients, and to obtain consent for police searches. The possible negative consequences of using the technology in these situations can vary from information security threats to malpractice or miscarriages of justice.

Most human-centred machine translation research to date has overlooked these potentially serious implications and tended to focus on how the technology is used in language services or in academic settings. This project will help to address a growing need for research focused on situations where non-linguists and non-students use machine translation to overcome a language barrier.

Partnering with CIOL, we will work to co-produce outputs and communicate the project's results to policy making and influencing bodies including Parliament, think tanks, government agencies, and trade unions. The project's outputs include open datasets, a policy advisory report as well as a book on ethical implications of machine translation beyond use-case settings in education and the language industry.

Machine translation is a tool with significant potential. Our intention with the project is ultimately to help this potential to be realised in ways that enrich cross-cultural communication, promote social justice, and protect individuals' right to information, which all require an evidence-based understanding of the role this technology plays in society.

Lucas Nunes Vieira
Academic and Principal Investigator
for the research project
University of Bristol

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CIOL Council's **initial reflections** on AI in translation and language services

1. **We can't stop AI technology but there are aspects of it we may need to challenge**
   Embracing AI technologies is inevitable and unavoidable, and they can make linguists' work more efficient and enjoyable, but we do need to highlight and confront the downsides.

2. **New models will mean new opportunities**
   As AI technologies become ubiquitous, they will also become more accessible, both lowering the costs of using them and enabling new business models for individual translators and for translation companies; there should be opportunities for all, so existing linguists need not be losers.

3. **In the future much more content will be translated**
   The vast majority of content produced worldwide is not translated. New technology will enable much more content to be translated globally with commensurate opportunities for linguists who can ensure it is fit for purpose.

4. **The human is – and will continue to be – essential**
   The skills of linguists in post-editing, interpretation of nuance and cross-cultural navigation will become all the more important and valuable as AI-based translation tools become more and more ubiquitous.

5. **The most skilled linguists will be the most in demand**
   As it becomes increasingly hard to distinguish machine from human translation – at least at the superficial level – creative and skilled linguists will be more and more valuable as they will make all the difference to the end product.

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CIOL Council's **major concerns** regarding AI's use in today's translation and language services

1. **Machines being left to their own devices**
   If machines seem to produce good (enough) quality content, companies, public services and governments may be tempted to cut corners and take risks.

2. **Data runs out of control**
   Society, organisations and individuals need to be alert to the data we 'give away' when we input it into translation tools and generative AI. We need to be more alert to where data goes, what use is made of it and who profits from it.

3. **AI gives a whole new meaning to 'fatal errors'**
   The errors that translation tools and AI make are more common in less common languages. Over time errors may also become harder and harder to spot (especially in English) as AI improves. This makes it all the more important that AI isn't used without human oversight in high stakes interpreting or translating - and this needs government, public services and regulatory attention.

4. **The hype will undermine the understanding of the added value an expert human linguist brings to the process**
   How the language industry works is already poorly understood in the wider world. The impact of these changes risks persuading the most sophisticated and the least that algorithms can reliably do things they can't.

5. **An even deeper digital divide for less well-resourced languages**
   Given the overwhelming advantages English has in the amount of digital content and the focus of commercial digital players there is a major risk that only the biggest 3-5 world languages will continue to thrive in an AI-led languages paradigm.

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For languages and linguists

About CIOL

CIOL (Chartered Institute of Linguists) is the leading professional body for people using foreign language skills at work, setting the standard for linguists worldwide. Membership offers professional recognition, and our range of membership grades leads to Chartership, recognised worldwide as the gold standard for practitioners, whatever their profession, publicly understood as a badge of quality and competence. We offer many benefits and services, such as mentoring and access to networks. Our awarding organisation, CIOL Qualifications, delivers fully regulated professional language qualifications, such as the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting, the Certificate in Translation and the Diploma in Translation, recognised by government departments, agencies, business and universities.

For more information on membership and qualifications, visit **ciol.org.uk**

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