

French paper goes global, risks ridicule with translation

10 July 2009, by Rory Mulholland



A man reads French business newspaper La Tribune in front of the Palais Brongniart, Paris, 2008. The leading French business newspaper is launching a multi-lingual version of its website using automatic translation, dispensing with journalists but producing often comic results.

A leading French business newspaper is launching a multi-lingual version of its website using automatic translation, dispensing with journalists but producing often comic results.

"Ryanair loan to make travel of the passengers upright," read a typically bizarre headline on La Tribune's site this week above a story in equally mangled English on the low-cost airline's plans to make people fly standing up.

"The Chinese car in ambush," "[Internet Explorer: mistrust!](#)" and "Assets of the continental right in management of the crisis" were some other mysterious headlines the same day on the site, which is still in an experimental phase.

But the paper's editors are confident that the project will, once the software is refined and a human hired to tweak the texts, open La Tribune to a potentially huge international audience.

"The aim is to be able to offer business news in different languages to reach a new public on the Internet," said Astrid Arbey, head of new media at the paper, France's second biggest-selling business daily.

The project involves the French website being translated in real time by computer software into English, German, Spanish and Italian, with Japanese and Chinese to come by the end of the year.

Most of the English articles on La Tribune's site were, with a little effort, understandable despite their many linguistic oddities.

But it is generally accepted that translation software cannot, as [Google Translate](#) admits on its site, "approach the fluency of a native speaker or possess the skill of a professional translator."

Arbey acknowledged that the results on La Tribune were still far from ideal, but said that the software was being continually updated and that within a few months it would achieve "almost perfect" news articles.

Britain's BBC has an entirely different model for the news website it provides in 30 different languages, staffed by hundreds of journalists, and says it has no plans to cut costs by following La Tribune's lead.

Spokesman Mike Gardner, who declined to comment directly on the French paper's approach, said that some of the BBC's online content was translated, but that this was always done by journalists.

"The whole point is that if you want news that has a resonance, you want journalists doing that," he said.

In Spain, the EFE news agency has been using computers for years to translate Spanish copy into

Portuguese and Catalan. But all the copy is revised (c) 2009 AFP by editors before being published.

"This system is possible because Spanish, Portuguese and Catalan are similar languages," said an agency spokesman. "But we don't think it is possible for English, for example, and we have translators for our English service."

La Tribune currently has one person dealing with the foreign language sites and plans to soon hire another person to tweak the English-language articles, said Arbey.

That approach, say some [journalists](#) at the paper, is typical of the cost-cutting mentality of Alain Weill, the media entrepreneur who bought the daily last year.

"The quality (of the foreign-language sites) is really mediocre because there is no journalistic intervention," said one journalist, who asked not to be named.

Worse, he said, the sites "damage the image of La Tribune," which in France has a reputation as a serious newspaper aimed at the banking, financial and business world.

No other French newspaper has gone down this road, said the journalist, because they know that automatic translation "doesn't work in journalism."

But Arbey is nevertheless confident that the foreign language sites will soon be producing clean copy thanks to ongoing software improvements and the intervention of the human being the paper plans to hire.

Will they be able to end sentences like these ones in the Ryanair story?

"Ryanair plays the provocation once more. After the paying toilets, ones surtaxes for the largest passengers, Ryanair would plan to make travel part of its passengers upright!"

The jury will have to remain out until the experimental phase -- the site is only sporadically viewable on the web at the moment -- is over.

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