Ranting and raving: Dvorak on MT

Mike Dillinger, February, 2008

John Dvorak's ignorant rants on machine translation (PC Magazine, Feb 8, 2008; Sept 19, 2006) are about free machine translation on the web – which is the same as complaining about the quality of cars in a junkyard. The quality is because of the price, not because of the technology. What would a free BMW look like? It surely would not look much like the state-of-the-art driving machine which we associate with that brand. Dvorak, in essence, wants a brand new BMW for free.

Technological systems like BMWs and machine translation are engineered to specifications. By design, they perform poorly outside of the situations for which they were built. Even the best BMW performs poorly (if at all) in deep snow, with an incompetent driver, or when fueled with ethanol. It would be absurd to conclude that BMWs are 'a joke' based on an assessment by an amateur engineer under these conditions. But that's what Dvorak is doing with MT: he has no idea of how to evaluate machine translation and MT systems were never designed for the almost infinite variability of the internet, so MT performs poorly and he has no idea why. Dvorak wants his free BMW to climb mountains and run on water, even when driven by a little old lady.

High-end translation systems have quietly been in large-scale use for over 30 years, providing reliable results to the European Commission, the US Air Force, Microsoft, Météo Canada, Ford, SAP, ATT, Océ, Symantec, and a wide range of other leading government and commercial organizations around the world. Hundreds of millions of dollars of 'smart money' have been invested in improving the technology, and these investments have continued to increase over the last 10 years. This is because MT provides an enormous benefit in the situations for which it was built.

Free technical analysis from pundits like Dvorak is worth exactly what you pay for it. Free MT is worth much more.