



American Translators Association

225 Reinekers Lane
Suite 590
Alexandria, VA 22314
Tel +1-703-683-6100
Fax +1-703-683-6122
www.atanet.org

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Contact: Caron Mason, CAE

Public Relations & Marketing Manager

(703) 683-6100, ext. 3003

caron@atanet.org

Human Linguists in Jeopardy? Do Grasshoppers Eat Kosher?

While the television debut of IBM's Watson has been hyped as a man-versus-machine showdown, it's more useful to see it as a telling example of computer strengths and limitations in the realm of language, says the American Translators Association.

ALEXANDRIA, VA (February 18, 2011) — “Watson,” the IBM computer that handily defeated two human trivia champions on the television game show *Jeopardy!*, has dazzled journalists and the general public with its language skills and revived the longstanding man-versus-machine debate. For the 11,000 members of the American Translators Association, however, the question of language and computers is an everyday reality—and the focus of the next issue of *The ATA Compass*, an e-newsletter for translation buyers.

Translators routinely use computer-assisted translation tools to work more efficiently — but reliable, high-quality automated translation is impossible without skilled humans to create and maintain the translation software and edit its input and output. Like IBM's *Jeopardy!* whiz, these applications can help humans recall and manipulate data with breathtaking speed and efficiency, but they are still unable to match the sensitivity that humans bring to language.

In a telling example, Watson once responded to the query “What do grasshoppers eat?” with the answer “kosher.” IBM programmers, citing this as a favorite error, explain that grasshoppers are a kosher food—a fact that seems to have misled their star pupil. But while Watson's mistakes can be funny and even endearing, real-world translation errors can offend an entire nation or cost a business valuable customers.

Automated translation is a fast, cost-effective way to generate “good enough” translations of high volumes of text, especially for material with a short shelf life. In fact, much of the material currently translated by computers would not have been translated at all in the past. But human translation is still vital whenever you need careful writing, notes the forthcoming issue of *The ATA Compass*.

Founded in 1959, the American Translators Association's primary goals include fostering and supporting the professional development of translators and interpreters and promoting the translation and interpreting professions. ATA, based in Alexandria, Virginia, currently has more than 11,000 members worldwide. For more information on ATA, please visit www.atanet.org. Learn more about *The ATA Compass* at www.atanet.org/compass.

Note to Editors: Advance copies of The ATA Compass are available upon request.

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