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American Translators Association Cautions White House on Future Language Policy

11,000-member Association's Letter to Obama: Technology alone is not the answer

(Alexandria, VA) October 19, 2009 -- The American Translators Association (ATA), the largest association of professional translators and interpreters in North America, issued a pointed response to a call for “automatic, highly accurate and real-time translation between the major languages of the world” in the White House’s recent Strategy for Innovation policy paper. In a letter dated October 2nd, ATA President Jiri Stejskal urged the Obama Administration to “take a long-term approach to language security by investing in human skills and promoting greater awareness of and expertise in foreign languages.”

“Are we against technology? Certainly not,” continued Stejskal. “Most translators use computer tools to speed up their work.” However, “both translation software **and** qualified human translators are vital to language security,” he noted. “Today all the leading proponents of computer translation recognize that human beings will **always** be essential, no matter how sophisticated translation programs become.”

The stakes are high: from diplomatic embarrassments to potentially lethal mistranslations in medical device instructions, translation errors create unnecessary hazards, cause misunderstandings, and diminish prestige and good will in international relations, national security and global commerce.

Press coverage of the Obama initiative has confused the issue by creating a false conflict between humans and technology. “This approach misses the point entirely,” noted Kevin Hendzel, national media spokesman for the Association. “Translation software and

human translators simply have different capabilities,” he said. “Software is indispensable for ‘gisting’ – translating large volumes of information in cases where immediate access is more important than accuracy – but only an experienced human translator has the skill and cultural awareness to convey every nuance when you absolutely have to get it right.”

“The challenge for translation consumers lies in understanding the proper application of each,” Hendzel noted. “Translation software is like a chain saw. It’s an invaluable tool when you need to chop a lot of wood in a hurry – but you need skill to use it safely, and it’s not recommended for surgery. When you need precision and sensitivity, you need a human translator.”

About ATA

Founded in 1959, the American Translators Association is the largest organization for translators and interpreters in the United States. Its primary goals include fostering and supporting the professional development of translators and interpreters and promoting the translation and interpreting professions. Based in Alexandria, Virginia, ATA currently has nearly 11,000 members working, with proven skill, in hundreds of languages worldwide. To learn more, visit www.atanet.org or call 703-683-6100.

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