International Journal of Translation and Interpretation Studies
ISSN: 2754-2602
DOI: 10.32996/ijtis
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijtis

IJTIS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Forms of Death of Professional Human Translators in the Era of Machine Translation Technologies

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| ABSTRACT
In this paper, we argued that professional human translators were dead. We explored the impact of advanced machine translation engines and artificial intelligence on professional human translators, taking those working in eight major language pairs as a case study. Qualitative data was collected with a questionnaire administered to 330 translators worldwide, and qualitative insights were gleaned from observation. The results showed seven forms of metaphorical death of professional human translators, namely loss of monopoly over the act of 'translating,' of monopoly over the title 'translator,' of style and voice, of identity and autonomy, of prestige and consideration, of security, and of opportunities and income.

| KEYWORDS
Death, professional human translator, machine translation technologies, artificial intelligence

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 05 February 2025 **PUBLISHED:** 25 February 2025 **DOI:** 10.32996/ijtis.2025.5.1.4

1. Introduction

The female cuckoo, a dove-sized migratory bird, does not build her own nest but lays her single egg in another bird's nest when the host is away or is distracted. It commits murder in the process, as it removes and destroys one egg and replaces it with hers. The distracted host sits on his remaining eggs and the cuckoo's egg until they hatch. The cuckoo's egg usually hatches first. Immediately upon hatching, the young cuckoo commits a massacre by instinctively pushing all the eggs or the babies of the host bird out of the nest. The phenomenon is called brood parasitism. The story of translators and machine translation (MT) technologies is comparable to brood parasitism. Just as host mothers do not invite cuckoos to lay eggs in their nests, linguists and translators never created machines that could translate (see Weaver 1955). Like host mothers, they were first distracted by their confidence in what they believed were the 'unmatchable […] procedures' involved in their craft and even disdainfully challenged scientists to invent machine translation engines (MTEs) tools if they could (see Joos 1956: 293). Then, when scientists took up the challenge and started developing MT solutions, linguists, especially in the United States of America and in the now defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, played the host mother again by contributing their expertise to all MTE development projects like the Georgetown-IBM Experiment (see Dostert 1957, Hutchins 1995) that eventually hatched and gradually developed from primitive, then advanced MTEs into today's fully-fledged mighty AI-powered translation tools. As we write, translators are still feeding the monsters.

In this paper, we argue that MTEs, in general, and translation-oriented AI-powered tools, in particular, are the cuckoos that pushed professional human translators out of the nest and that translators died in various ways from the shocks they suffered as they fell. Specifically, we take stock of what translators have lost to automatic translation technologies and artificial intelligence and explore what their 'remains' look like. We identified seven losses, which we call forms of deaths.

2. Scope

Not all languages are equally translatable with MTEs. Therefore, the claims made in this study and its results are limited to the eight language pairs listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Lists of language pairs in scope for the study

No	Pair
1	English into French
2	French into English
3	English into Spanish
4	Spanish into English
5	English into Portuguese
6	Portuguese into English
7	English into Italian
8	Italian into English

The languages in those pairs, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian, were considered by Lionbridge[1] in 2022 as the top four languages with high machine translatability potential from English. The claims and results of the paper are only generalisable to the 27 languages with high machine translatability potential, as ranked by Lionbridge.

3. Literature review

Scholarly research on the theme of death and translators is scarce while academic papers onthe impact of MTEs on professional translators and the profession of 'translator' is even scarcer. Zhong (1998) explores the 'rhetorical' death of the translator, drawing from Roland Barthes' post-structuralist theory of the death of the author that shifts the source of meaning in literary texts from authors to readers. Zhong argues that just as authors in Barthes' theory, translators as authors of translations have no control over how translation users produce meaning from translated texts. This loss of control by translators over meaning production symbolizes their death. In this paper, we extend Zhong's concept of rhetorical death beyond ownership over meaning to include other forms of death. Lee (2011) also uses Barthes' theory to sustain his argument that machine translation causes the death of human translators by depriving them of agency and creativity in the translation processes. This paper further explores this MT-induced loss of agency and creativity with fresh insights and examples. Zulawnik (2020) examines the risks that translators face in translating politically or religiously controversial texts, including death threats. He shows how such death threats, assassination attempts, and assassinations lead to both the metaphorical death of translators as they strive to achieve invisibility as part of their risk management strategies and their physical death when translators are assassinated. We do not consider self-censorship and physical death as a possible impact of MTE and do not examine them in the present article. Batchelor (2023) examines connections between translation and concepts of mortality and immortality as well as the 'potential for translation to serve as a distraction from death as well as confrontation with death' (2023:364). She concludes that beyond immortality by proxy, 'translators can achieve immortality in the cosmic sense suggested by Jorge Luis Borges by creating translations that are in themselves events of thought' (2023: 364). The form of death (and immortality) that Batchelor discusses is machine translation and human translation-agnostic. Our focus in this paper is the forms of death from MTEs.

Unlike academic literature, non-scientific literature on the topic is abundant. Indeed, the word 'translator' collocates with 'death' and with the lexical field of death in dozens of blog posts and similar online content. For instance, words like 'doomed[2],' 'killed,' 'dying[3],' 'death sentence[4],' and 'dead[5]' are used in various blog posts to describe translators and the translation industry.

4. Methodology

Data for this study was collected through observation and a 12-question Google Form questionnaire administered to translators through TranslatorsDirectory.com. This platform serves as a directory where freelance translators and translation agencies can list their services, making it easier for potential clients to find qualified professionals. For a fee, we used it to send the questionnaire

[1] Lionbridge is the 5th largest language services provider worldwide in 2024, according to Common Sense Advisory. See ranking here: https://csa-research.com/Featured-Content/For-LSPs/Global-Language-Services-Industry-2024/The-Largest-Language-Service-Providers-2024

[2] https://hellofuture.orange.com/en/translation-professions-doomed-by-artificial-intelligence-really/

[3] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/translation-industry-dying-because-artificial-jennifer-aouad

[4] https://www.larina-translation.com/en/single-post/artificial-intelligence-vs-interpreters/

[5] https://chinai.substack.com/p/chinai-258-is-translation-already

to translators working in the eight language pairs listed in Table 1 above. Translators were targeted irrespective of geography and gender. The questions asked are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Questionnaire

No	Question
1	Are you a freelance translator or an in-house translator?
2	What is the percentage of MTPE jobs you receive in your monthly translation job requests?
3	Would you say you have been receiving more MTPE job requests recently than before AI-powered translation tools arrived?
4	Have you witnessed a decline in BOTH human translation and MTPE job opportunities since the advent of AI-powered translation engines?
5	Would you say that translation services buyers are increasingly tempted to use AI-powered translation engines instead of human translators?
6	On a scale of 1 to 5, how helpful are machine translation engines to you as a translator each time you translate? 1 = Not helpful at all. 2 = A bit helpful. 3 = Rather helpful. 4 = Very helpful. 5 = Extremely helpful
7	Do you OFTEN use machine translation engines to assist you in your non-MTPE (HUMAN translation) projects? (Please answer Yes even if you often use them to translate and fully post-edit one segment out of hundreds.)
8	Do you feel that more and more individuals and businesses needing translation services (not translation companies) are tempted to do the translation themselves with the help of AI-powered translation engines?
9	Has your revenue dropped, increased, or remained unchanged since the advent of AI-powered machine translation engines?
10	On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you about the VIABILITY of the profession of 'translator' in the middle term in the face of competition from AI? 1 = Not confident at all. 2 = A bit confident 3 = Rather confident 4 = Very confident 5 = Extremely confident.
11	The translation industry of tomorrow will need more machine translation post-editors than human translators. True or false?
12	Would you say translators are more respected or less respected (by society in general) since the advent of machine translation engines in general and AI-powered machine translation engines in particular?

We sent the questionnaire twice in nine days to get the maximum number of respondents. On day nine, 330 translators had responded. Their responses are analyzed below.

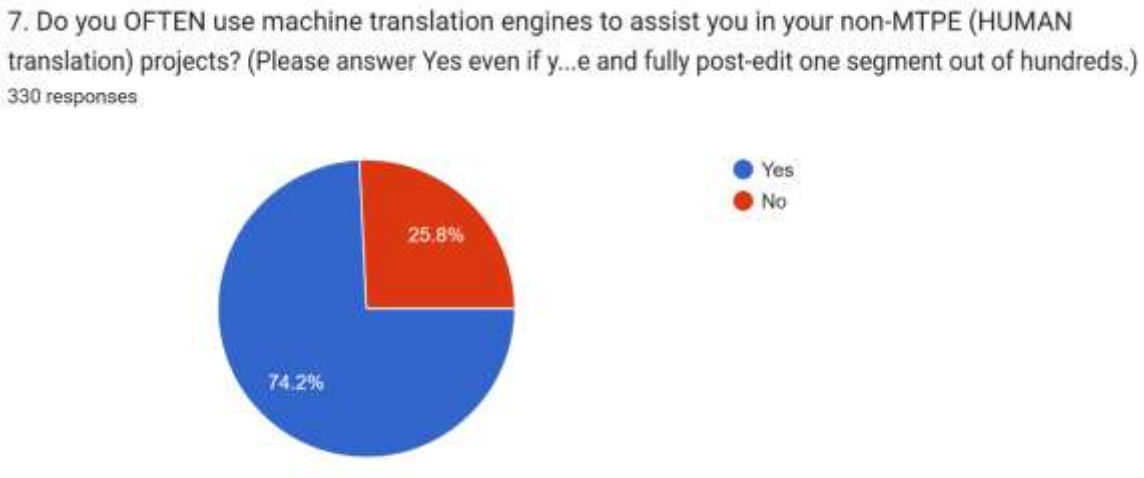
5. Data analysis and interpretation

Data collected through the questionnaire and observation is analyzed, focusing on what human translators have lost to MTEs. Seven forms of losses were identified and discussed below.

5. 1. Loss of monopoly over the act of 'translating'

Before the advent of MTEs, translating, which is the conversion of words and the transfer of meaning, used to involve a mechanical or physical dimension and a mental dimension. The mechanical dimension consisted of typing the target text's words and sentences. The mental dimension of translating was meaning retrieval from a source text and meaning transfer into a target text. Both mental activities used to be the exclusive preserve of the human translator as only humans could read a text, capture its meaning, and then render it in a target language. Question seven was intended to test human translators' reliance on MTEs for these mechanical and mental dimensions of translating. The results are presented in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Translators' reliance on MTEs for the mechanical and mental aspects of translating



The pie chart above shows that 245 respondents (74.2%) often use MTEs on their projects. Just 85 respondents (25.8%) claimed they do not often use them. These results signal a heavy dependence of human translators on MTEs for word conversion and meaning transfer in the context where they are consistently required to process larger volumes of words at breakneck speed and in record time.

Until the advent of MTEs, human translators working with feathers, pencils, or typewriters had a monopoly over the mechanical task of typing target texts. In that respect, translators were typists. That monopoly started to dwindle with the arrival of MTEs equipped with translation memories capable of storing translations and subsequently suggesting them as perfect match and fuzzy match segments that the translator could simply check, edit, confirm, and proceed. Then, MTEs totally removed the mechanical part of translating from the hands of the human translator by doing the word conversion themselves and presenting the human translator with target texts for editing. As far as meaning is concerned, human translators alone used to be intelligent and context-aware and would consider many possible interpretations of a given word, phrase, or sentence and envisage multiple candidate translations. Automatic translation tools now do the same. The most advanced, like DeepL, Yandex, Google Translate, or Reverso, would even suggest multiple translations for one word, phrase, or sentence, allowing the translator to pick the option that matches their specific context.

To sum up, the near total loss of monopoly over the act of translating by human translators, as evidenced by their heavy (74.4%) reliance on MTEs, means their death as typists and as meaning retrievers and transferers. They are mere meaning checkers. These two losses are the first form of human translators' death in the AI age.

5.2. Loss of monopoly over the title 'translator'

The title 'translator' is still exclusively associated with human beings in all the papers and online dictionaries we consulted in October 2024. As screenshots 1 and 2 below indicate, Cambridge Dictionary Online and Collins Dictionary Online define a 'translator' as a 'person.' The same word is used in the Britannica Dictionary, while others use 'someone.'

Screenshot 1: Definition of translator, according to Cambridge Dictionary online

As we can see, the word "translator" is defined as "a person whose job is changing words, especially written words, into a different language."

Screenshot 2: Definition of the word 'translator' according to Collins Dictionary online

Here, Collins Dictionary says "A translator is a person whose job is translating writing or speech from one language to another."

However, another definition of the term has emerged with MT technologies: 'A translator or language translation program is a software application or service that translates text or speech from one language to another.' This definition from Computer Hope suits MTEs developers' understanding of this word. Indeed, a growing number of MTEs are overtly giving the title 'translator' to their language translation softwares. Screenshots 2 to 5 below illustrate DeepL, Yandex, Bing, and Microsoft examples.

Screenshot 2: DeepL names its translation functionality 'translator.'

Screenshot 3: Yandex names its translation functionality 'translator.'

Screenshot 4: Bing names its translation functionality 'translator.'

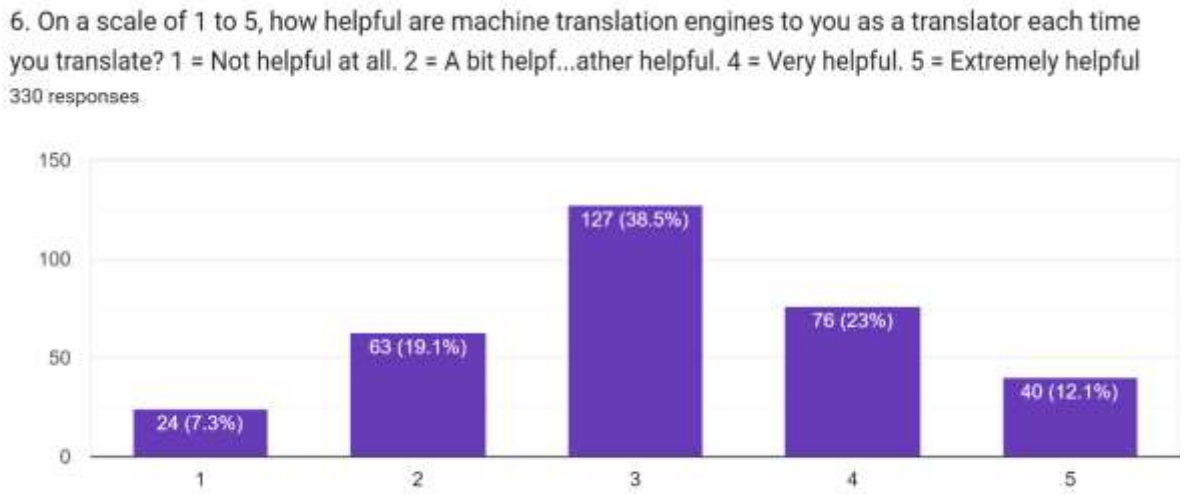
Screenshot 5: Microsoft names its translation functionality 'translator.'

As screenshots 2 to 5 show, human translators have lost their monopoly over the title 'translator.' The word translator no longer unequivocally refers to a human being. In the era of AI, it has become necessary to specify if we are referring to a human being or a software whenever we are using the word 'translator.' This loss of monopoly over the title 'translator' is the second form of death of human translators in the age of AI.

5.3. Loss of style and voice

Before MTEs, translators were authors because they would think up every target word they use, craft every target sentence from scratch, and write with their original second style (see Baker 2000, Munday 2008) and second voice (see Hermans 1996). Nowadays, their heavy reliance on MTEs in the frequency of use, as question 7 revealed, and their globally positive attitude toward MTEs, as Chart 2 below indicates, point to their loss of style and voice in translation.

Chart 2: Human translators' attitude toward MTEs



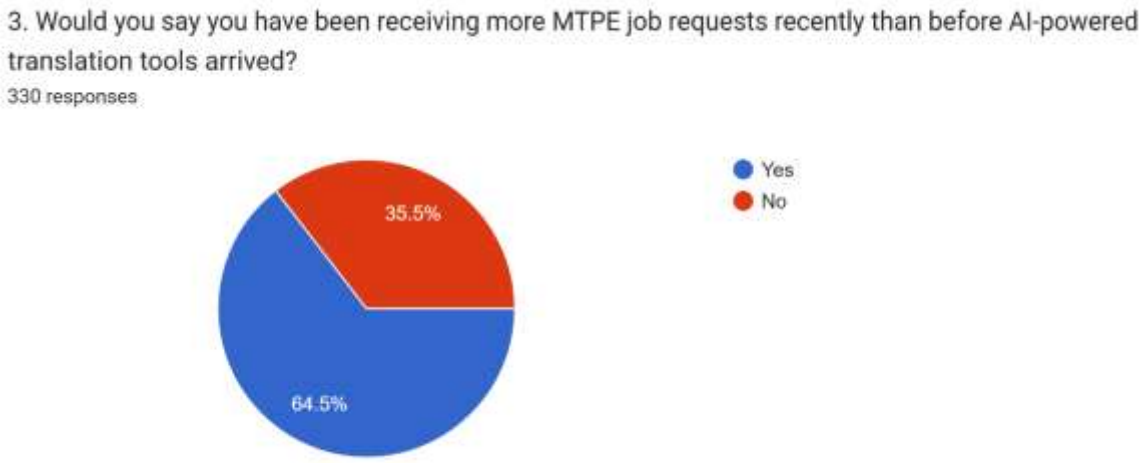
As the chart shows, only 24 (7.3%) human translators considered MT not helpful at all, while 63 (19.1%) found it a bit helpful, 127 (38.5%) rather helpful, 76 (23%) very helpful, and 40 (12.1%) extremely helpful. Points 4 and 5 on this Likert scale show that more respondents (116 or 35.1%) think highly of MT than those with negative (1) to lukewarm (2) attitudes, that is, 87 or 26.4%. The neutral (3), 38.5%, are almost as many as the highly optimistic respondents (35.1%). The extensive adoption scale revealed by Chart 1 and the dominantly positive attitude towards MT exposed by Chart 2 signals the transfer of translation authorship responsibilities by humans to machines. As a matter of fact, with this transfer, human translators give up/are deprived of their authorial duties and become post-editors of machine-authored translations. As post-editors, they are straight-jacketed by the machines as they simply check and adjust the style and voice of the presented translations. They become style and voice checkers, not authors. This loss of original authorial voice and style to machines is the third form of death of human translators in the era of AI.

5.4. Loss of identity and autonomy

A loss of autonomy and identity is a consequence of human translators' heavy reliance on MT (see Chart 1) and their largely positive attitude toward it (see Chart 2). On the one hand, they have lost their ability to perform meaning retrieval, meaning transfer, and typing processes autonomously, as the recourse to MTEs has become a deeply entrenched habit. On the other hand, the habit of using MT alters the identity of human translators, who have largely metamorphosed into post-editors. This metamorphosis is a significant impact of MTEs on the translation industry.

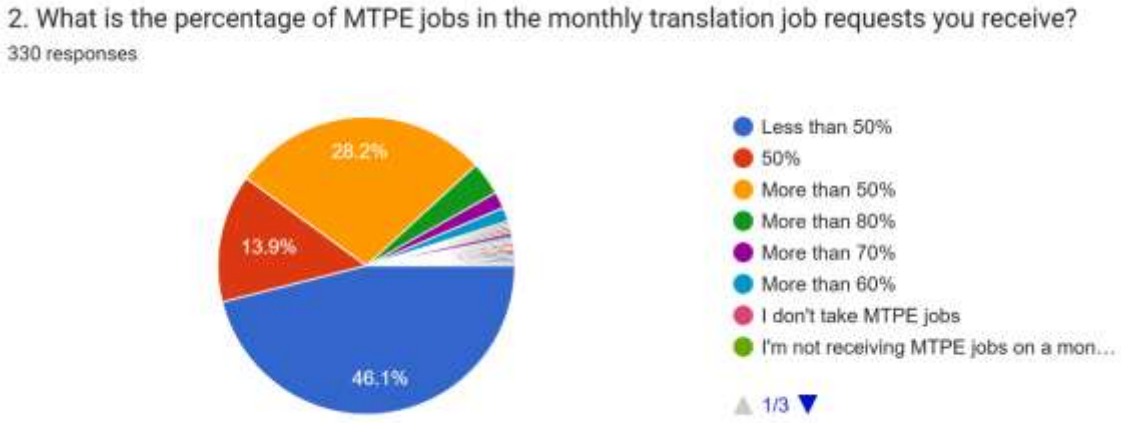
Human translators' loss of autonomy is also reflected in their compulsory adaptation to market needs as they are compelled to take what they are being proposed in order to survive. Questions 2 and 3 reveal the extent of market pressure on the translators' autonomy over the type of tasks they have to and wish to work on.

Chart 3: Market-induced loss of autonomy of human translators (general)



As this chart shows, 213 respondents (64.5%) indicated that they have been receiving more MTPE job requests since the arrival of AI-powered translation tools. Only 117 (35.5%) claim they have not noticed such an increase. This increase not only reflects market needs but also signals the significant contribution of the market force that shape the transformation of human translators into post-editors. The scale of the pressure from the market is captured in Chart 4 below.

Chart 4: Market-induced loss of autonomy of human translators (detailed)



152 respondents (46.1%) reported that despite the general increase in MTPE jobs since the advent of AI-powered translation tools, MTPE projects make up less than 50% of the job requests from their clients. Interestingly, 93 respondents (28.2%), that is, more than half of 152, reported that MTPE jobs make up more than 50% (50-60%) of their workload, while up to 46 (13.9%) report that half of their projects are now MTPE jobs. Even more interesting is that up to 12 respondents (3.6%) reported that more than 80% of their workload is MTPE jobs. Also worth highlighting is the category of respondents unaffected by the MT tide. Just 1 respondent (0.3%) said they resisted market forces by refusing to take MTPE, while some 10 respondents (3.03%) reported percentages from zero to 0.6.

The above-described loss of identity of human translators through their market-induced metamorphosis into post-editors and their market-imposed loss of autonomy over the choice of the type of assignments to work on are the fourth form of death of human translators.

5.5. Loss of prestige and consideration

From ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to the end of the 20th century, human translators were the sole masters of their craft. Entry barriers into the profession were very high as it took patience, deep linguistic skills, subject matter expertise, and a broad cultural understanding of the source and target contexts to act as a translator. They were rare, highly sought-after, and highly regarded in society. This prestige began to wane as soon as advanced MTEs became generally available. Chart 5 below captures respondents' appraisal of how respected they feel since the advent of MTEs.

Chart 5: Respondents' assessment of the respect they receive since the advent of MTEs

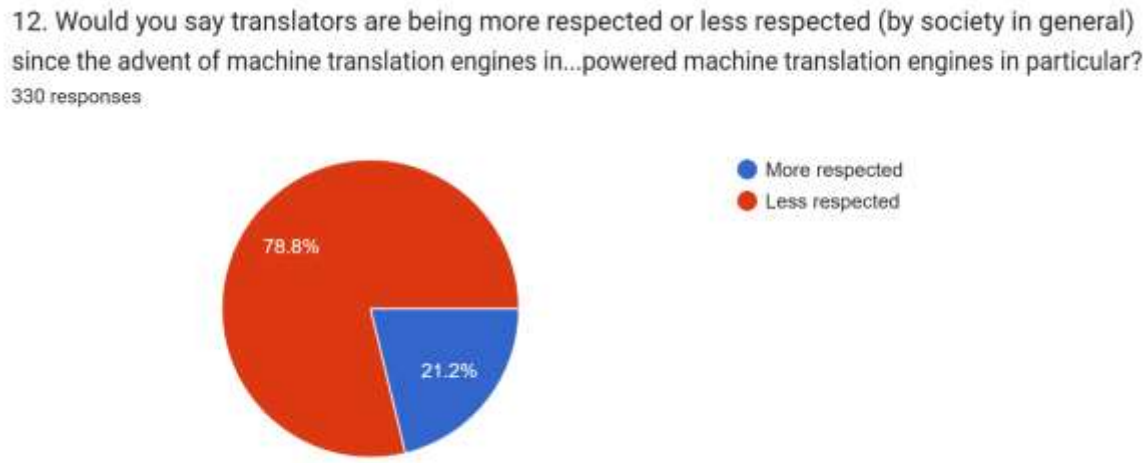


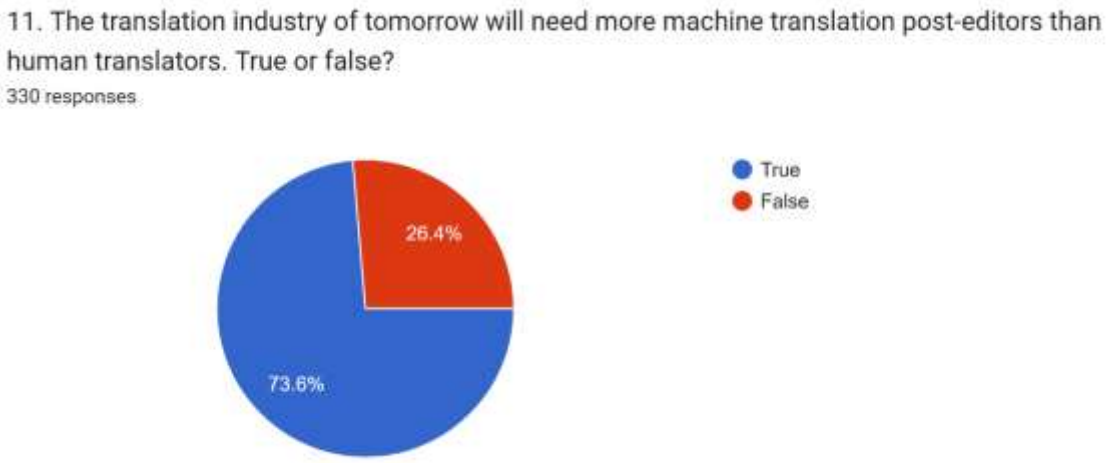
Chart 5 shows that 260 respondents (78.8%) reported feeling less respected since the advent of MTEs, while just 70 (21.2%) said they felt more respected since MTEs came into existence. Many factors account for the growing feeling of disrespect among many human translators. Some include the reinforcement, in the mind of the man in the street, of the false beliefs that every bilingual can be a translator, that MTEs are as good as human translators, that the input of the human translator as post-editor is essentially cosmetic, and that post-editing should be fast and cheap.

Because of these beliefs, human translators face competition from an army of bilinguals and even a handful of monolinguals who successfully pose as translators. In their attempts to get the lowest rates possible, prospective clients routinely tell human translators they only require their services because they lack the time to translate themselves, thereby depriving human translators of the acknowledgment of any special skills and suggesting that they or the MTEs they can use free of charge are equally as good as professional translators. In other words, they reduce the input of professional human translators to the time they spend translating or post-editing. Unreasonable time-related**,** volume-related**,** and rate-related requests by translation service buyers also point to their disrespect for professional human translators. Indeed, some professional human translators have reported requests to post-edit tens of thousands of words in 24 hours, all for a trifling compensation. Another indication of disrespect is the growing tendency among buyers of translation services to turn bilingual staff members into revisers of the translations delivered by professional translators. Finally, the common statement 'there is nothing complex; we have pre-translated it with our MTE, you just need control if there are no major issues' from translation companies' project managers at the rate and deadline negotiation stage of a project assignment is yet another signal of disrespect for human translators. These examples and the fact that 78.8% of respondents considered themselves disrespected are signal a loss of prestige and consideration, which is the fifth form of death of human translators.

5.6. Loss of security

The feeling of insecurity over the survival of their profession haunts human translators. Obvious evidence of the panic is the amount of literature on the viability or survival potential of the profession in the face of MT. A handful of pieces of academic research and thousands of articles, blog posts, videos, and press releases online from translation companies and translators' associations, such as the American Translators Association (ATA), address the issue of replacing human translators with machines. While almost all those academic texts (see Ubanako 2023), articles, blog posts, and press releases are optimistic about the future of human translators, the fear of replacement still prevails amongst translators, as Charts 6 and 7 below show.

Chart 6: Human translators' appraisal of their survival as translators, not post-editors



As Chart 6 shows, 243 respondents (73.6%) believed that post-editors, not translators, will survive in the translation industry of tomorrow. Just 87 (26.4%), almost three times less than 243, are of a different opinion. This significant imbalance translates to the general feeling of insecurity that haunts human translators about their destiny. This insecurity is further captured in Chart 7.

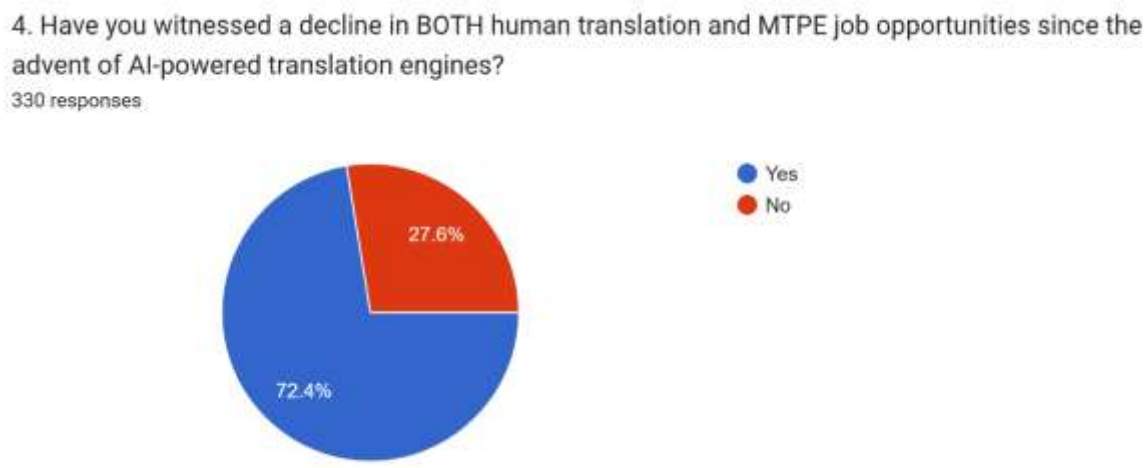
Chart 7: Human translators' appraisal of the viability of the profession 'translator'

Point 1 of the Likert scale shows that 52 respondents (15.8%) are not confident at all about the viability of the profession of 'translator' in the mid-term in the face of competition from MTEs. This starkly compares with point 5 where 41 respondents **(**12.4%) reported extreme confidence**.** The fact that point 1 outweighs point 5 is telling in that it gives a clear picture of the shift from an era of complete confidence (before MTEs) to one of doubt (era of MTEs). Points 2 and 4 confirm the trend, and the contrast is starker as just 54 respondents (16.4%) claimed they were very confident, while 82 (24.8%) said they were only somewhat **confident**. Finally, 101 respondents (30.6%) remained relatively neutral**,** a stance that also translates doubt, not total security. This loss of security is the sixth form of death of the human translator.

5.7. Loss of opportunities and income

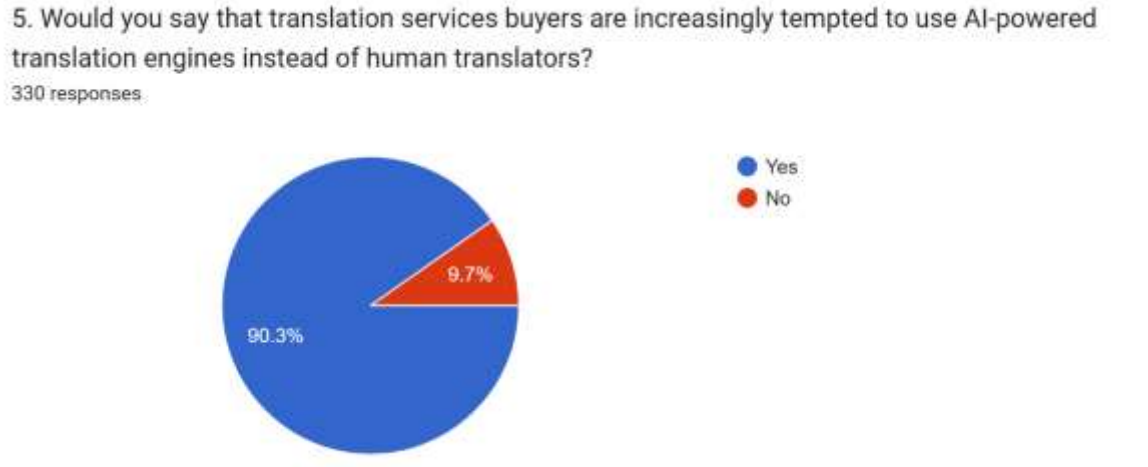
Prior to MTEs, translators, as sole masters of their craft, used to capture all the business opportunities available. Their monopoly over providing translation services also meant control over the pricing: they could choose to serve only the highest bidders. Charts 8, 9, 10, and 11 below indicate that MTEs in general and AI-powered MTEs flipped the table and placed human translators in an uncomfortable situation of competition with new players, new options, and of shrunk bargaining power.

Chart 8: Assessment of the decline in job opportunities for professional human translators



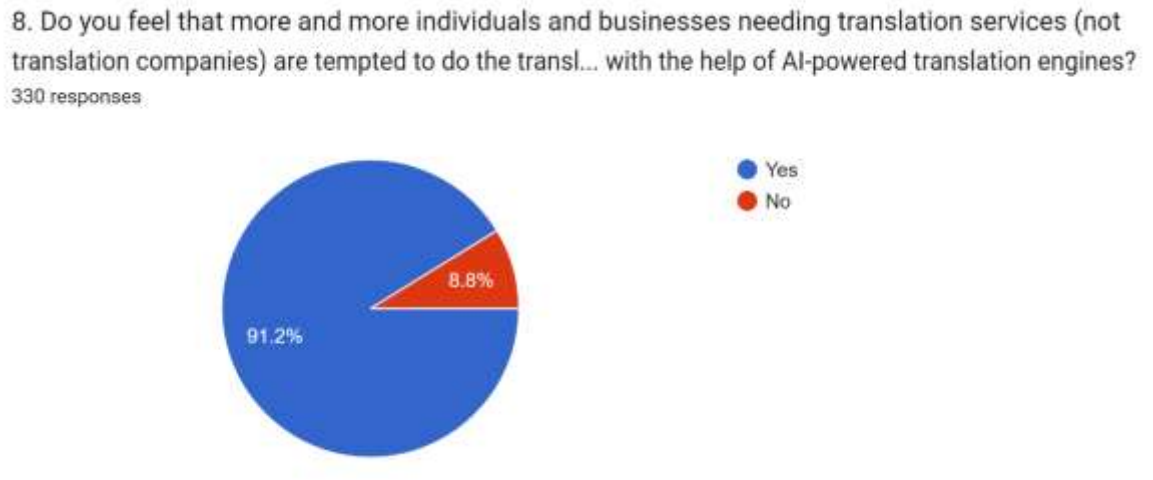
As the pie chart shows, 239 translators (72.4%) reported a decline in both human and machine translation post-editing job opportunities since the advent of AI-powered translation engines, while **only 91 respondents (27.6%) reported no such decline.** Only 91 (27.6%) claimed they did not experience such a decline. Respondents' opinion on the reason for this decline is captured in Chart 9 below.

Chart 9: Reason for the decline in job opportunities for professional human translators (1)



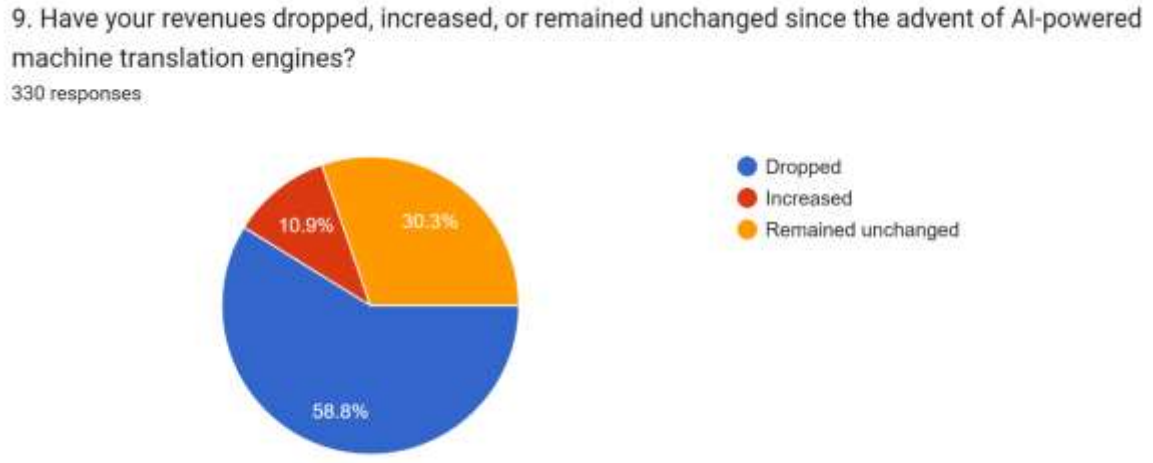
298 respondents (90.3%) believed that translation services buyers are increasingly tempted to use AI-powered translation engines instead of human translators. Only 32 respondents (9.7%) were not of the same opinion. Buyers in this question included translation companies. The same question with translation companies excluded yielded the same result, as Chart 10 below shows.

Chart 10: Reason for the decline in job opportunities for professional human translators (2)



301 respondents (91.2%) believed potential buyers of translation services, excluding translation companies, are more tempted to do without the help of human translators. Just 29 (8.8%) had a different appraisal of reality. Charts 8, 9, and 10 revealed that loss of opportunities from direct clients and translation companies also means loss of income for professional human translators. Chart 11 below captures their general appraisal of the impact of MTEs and AI-powered MTEs on their income.

Chart 11: Impact of MTEs on the income of professional human translators



194 respondents (58.8%) claimed their revenues have dropped since the advent of MTEs, while 100 respondents (30.3%) indicated their revenues have remained unchanged. Only 36 respondents (10.9%) reported an increase in income. Worth underscoring is that respondents who experienced a revenue drop are about two times as many as those with stable revenues. This discrepancy matches the loss of opportunities captured in Charts 8, 9, and 10 and reflects the MT-induced ever-increasing downward pressure on rates from direct clients and translation companies. This loss of income and opportunities is the seventh form of death of professional human translators.

6. Conclusion

Data analysis showed that the loss of monopoly over the act of 'translating,' the loss of monopoly over the title 'translator,' the loss of style and voice, the loss of identity and autonomy, the loss of prestige and consideration, the loss of security, and the loss of opportunities and income are the seven types of losses that professional human translators have suffered as a result of the

advent of MTEs in general and AI-powered MTEs in particular. On the one hand, the scale of such losses, as measured through the various charts, is so significant—it varies from 58.8% (Chart 11) to 91.2% (Chart 10)—that professional human translators can be described as metaphorically dead. On the other hand, the handful who continue to resist the force of the tidal wave of MTEs can be metaphorically described as the 'remains' of professional human translators. It is important to clarify that these findings are only valid for the mainstream languages considered in the study, which have so far received most of the attention and financial investments of translation technology companies in general and artificial intelligence firms in particular. Translators working in the languages and language pairs unaffected by the AI revolution will remain alive until the AI wave claims their lives. These findings indicate that both the adaptation processes undertaken by professionals in the translation industry in response to AI-induced changes and the adjustments that translation schools will implement in response to these shifts represent promising directions for future scholarly inquiry.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Author Contribution : All the authors have read and agreed with the published version of this paper. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.
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