



American Translators Association

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October 2, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Your recent Strategy for American Innovation policy paper recognizes that accurate translation is vital to our economy, our national security and our relationships with other nations. At the American Translators Association (ATA), we agree entirely — but we are also convinced that technology is only part of the answer. As the largest association of translators and interpreters in the United States, we urge you 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 – in fact, most professional translators already use computer tools to speed up their work. But computational linguists have been working for over 50 years to achieve “fully automatic high-quality computer translation,” and despite all the changes wrought in our lives by technological advances, no computer can match the language skills of a five-year-old child.

The reason is simple: Computers cannot translate effectively – that is, they cannot entirely convey meaning from one language to another – because computers are logical and real human languages are not. Using a language well requires knowledge of how the world is understood in that language. And while computers can analyze, compile and compare, they cannot understand.

This is not to say that translation technology is not very useful within certain limits. Computers can process enormous volumes of text at incredible speeds, and provide the gist of a foreign-language document quickly and cheaply. Translation software is therefore the perfect tool for producing a “good enough” translation.

But in many human interactions – most critically in diplomacy, commerce, and national security, the very areas cited in your report – accuracy, nuance and cultural sensitivity are paramount, and “good enough” is... not good enough. Errors in translation and interpreting can waste enormous amounts of time and money, and



they can generate literally incalculable costs in terms of misunderstanding and loss of prestige.

In short, both translation software **and** qualified human translators are vital to your goal of achieving language security. Today all the leading proponents of computer translation recognize that human beings will always be essential, no matter how sophisticated translation programs become.

ATA is the largest association of translators and interpreters in the United States, with almost 11,000 members and a growing reputation as an international leader in our field. Our members include thousands of individual practitioners working, with proven skill, in hundreds of language combinations, as well as representatives of large and small translation companies, government agencies, academic institutions, and the computer-translation community. We are already actively pursuing initiatives designed to raise awareness of translation and interpreting among language services consumers, students and teachers, and the broader public. We strongly support the focus on language issues in your innovation strategy, and have the resources and breadth to advance your cause. Please let us know how we can help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jiri Stejskal', written in a cursive style.

Dr. Jiri Stejskal
ATA President