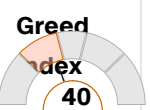


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Like digging ‘your own professional grave’: The translators grappling with losing work to AI

JAN 23, 2026

By Lianne Kolirin





Machine translation has reduced the amount of work available to human translators and interpreters, and depressed their earnings. (*fotostorm/E+/Getty Images*)

London — As a rare Irish-language translator, Timothy McKeon enjoyed steady work for European Union institutions for years. But the rise of artificial intelligence tools that can translate text and, increasingly, speech nearly instantly has upended his livelihood and that of many others in his field.

He says he lost about 70% of his income when the EU translation work dried up. Now, available work consists of polishing machine-generated translations, jobs he refuses “on principle” because they help train the software taking work away from human translators. When the edited text is fed back into the translation software, “it learns from your work.”

“The more it learns, the more obsolete you become,” he said. “You’re essentially expected to dig your own professional grave.”

While workers worldwide ponder how AI might affect their livelihoods – a topic on the agenda at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week – that question is no longer hypothetical in the translation industry. Apps like Google Translate already reduced the need for human translators, and increased adoption of generative AI has only accelerated that trend.

A 2024 survey of writing professionals by the United Kingdom's Society of Authors showed that more than a third of translators had lost work due to generative AI, which can create sophisticated text, as well as images and audio, from users' prompts. And 43% of translators said their income had dropped because of the technology.

In the United States, data from 2010-23 analyzed by Carl Frey and Pedro Llanos-Paredes at Oxford University showed that regions where Google Translate was in greater use saw slower growth in the number of translator jobs. Originally powered by statistical translation, Google Translate shifted to a technique called neural translation in 2016, resulting in more natural-sounding text and bringing it closer to today's AI tools.

"Our best baseline estimate is that roughly 28,000 more jobs for translators would've been added in the absence of machine translation," Frey told CNN.

"It's not a story of mass displacement but I think that's very likely to follow."



Timothy McKeon refuses to edit machine translations, saying it's like digging "your own professional grave." *(Courtesy Timothy McKeon)*

The story is similar globally, suggests McKeon: He is part of the Guerrilla Media Collective, an international group of translators and communications professionals, and says everyone in the collective supplements their income with other work due to the impact of AI.

‘The entire US is looking at Wisconsin’

Christina Green is president of Green Linguistics, a provider of language services, and a court interpreter in Wisconsin.

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She worries her court role could soon vanish because of a bill that would allow courts to use AI or other machine translation in civil or criminal proceedings, and in certain other cases.

Green and other language professionals have been fighting the proposal since it was introduced in May. “The entire US is looking at Wisconsin” as a precedent, Green said, noting that the bill’s opponents had so far succeeded in stalling it.

While Green still has her court job, her company recently lost a major Fortune 10 corporate client, which she said opted to use a company offering AI translation instead. The client accounted for such an outsized share of her company’s business that she had to make layoffs.



Christina Green has had to let staff go because her translation company has lost a large amount of work to AI. (Courtesy Alvin Connor/Havone Studios)

“People and companies think they’re saving money with AI, but they have absolutely no clue what it is, how privacy is affected and what the ramifications are,” Green said.

‘Governments are not doing enough’

Fardous Bahbouh, based in London, is an Arabic-language translator and interpreter for international media organizations, including CNN. She has seen a considerable reduction in written work in recent years, which she attributes to technological developments and the financial pressures facing media outlets.

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Bahbouh is also studying for a PhD focusing on the translation industry. Her research shows that technology, including AI, is “hugely impacting” translators and interpreters.



Governments should be doing more to protect foreign-language professionals from the threat posed by AI, according to Fardous Bahbouh. *(Courtesy Fardous Bahbouh)*

“I worry a great deal that governments are not doing enough to help them transition into other work, which could lead to greater inequality, in-work poverty and child poverty,” she told CNN.

Many translators are indeed looking to retrain “because translation isn’t generating the income it previously did,” according to Ian Giles, a translator and chair of the Translators Association at the UK’s Society of Authors. The picture is similar in the United States: Many translators are leaving the profession, Andy Benzo, president of the American Translators Association, told CNN.

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And Kristalina Georgieva, the head of the International Monetary Fund, said in Davos Thursday that the number of translators and interpreters at the fund had gone down to 50 from 200 due to greater use of technology.

Governments should also do more for those remaining in the translation industry, by introducing stronger labor protections, Bahbouh argued.

Human professionals still needed

Despite advances in machine translation and interpretation, technology can't replace human language workers entirely just yet.



Andy Benzo, president of the American Translators Association, says the risks of using AI translation in "high-stakes" fields are "humongous." (Courtesy Andy Benzo)

While using AI tools for everyday tasks like finding directions is "low-risk," human translators will likely need to be involved for the foreseeable future in diplomatic, legal, financial and medical contexts where the risks are "humongous," according to Benzo.

"I'm a translator and a lawyer and in both professions the nuance of each word is very specific and the (large language models powering AI tools) aren't there yet, by far," she said.

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Another field relatively untouched by machine translation tools is literary translation.

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Giles, who translates commercial fiction from Scandinavian languages into English, used to supplement his income with translation work from companies, but that has now disappeared. Meanwhile, literary commissions have continued to come in, he said.

There's also one key element of communication that AI can't replace, according to Oxford University's Frey: Human connection.

"The fact that machine translation is pervasive doesn't mean you can build a relationship with somebody in France without speaking a word of French," he said.

Ana Nicolaci da Costa contributed reporting.

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