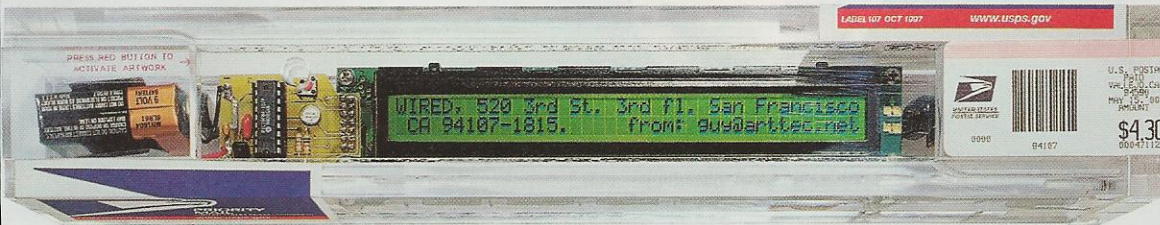


# RANTS & RAVES



"Digital Numeric Relevator Mark XX," by Guy Marsden

## Literal Translation

The US media has consistently failed to capture the truth about machine translation and the inherent and stubborn limitations in using software to leap the language barrier ("Hello, World," *Wired* 8.05, page 220). Every single media story on MT is a blend of brainless "universal translator" technohype and an irresistible journalistic Pavlovian urge to print silly and irresponsible claims by software vendors. When I first spotted your May cover, I braced myself for the inevitable salivating over how language barriers are about to be smashed to pieces. I was relieved to discover that *Wired* chose to buck this trend and actually report the truth.

Kevin Hendzel

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Great feature on MT ("Talking to Strangers," page 224)! A word about Warren Weaver: In 1954 he became agitated about the growing prevalence of atomic radiation, so he appropriated \$3 million of Rockefeller Foundation funds for a study by the US National Academy of Sciences on the topic. It was my good luck to be assigned to staff the committee, which consisted of a dazzling array of Nobel laureates, a dozen of the top American geneticists, and subcommittees on agriculture, waste disposal, and other areas of concern. The study alerted the country to the problem and had many indirect results, including banning the X-ray machines then used in shoe stores and stimulating the development of very-low-dosage X-ray machines for dentistry.

Weaver also had cute dimples, which we saw a lot of because he was smiling or laughing most of the time. He needed his sense of humor,

because managing that array of geneticists was like running a wild animal act in the circus.

### Return to Sender

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Congratulations on one of the most perceptive articles that I have seen published on the subject of machine translation. You correctly position the central importance that translation technology will play in the future welfare of all cultures, not just those with English speakers.

Japan, for example, has long sponsored MT as a means of gathering economic intelligence from competitors, but now the social implications are being addressed. According to the "Report of the Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century" (see [www.kantei.go.jp/jp/21century/report/overview.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/21century/report/overview.html)), "people must possess the ability to access and converse with the rest of the world, meaning that they can freely and immediately obtain information, understand it, and express their own ideas clearly. The possession or lack of this ability, which we may call 'global literacy,' will determine whether or not one will enjoy a better life in the world of the 21st century."

Guy Bague

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