The key approaches to translation

At a high level, there are two main approaches to translation: human and automatic. Depending on the type of text, the context, the target audience, and other factors, businesses will choose one or the other—or a combination of both. Let's take a closer look at each approach.

Human translation

Human translation is the conventional approach to translation. In human translation, one or more translators convert the text from the source language to the target language. They may aid themselves with digital tools, such as CAT tools or online resources, but they ultimately rely on their own understanding of

the source text, target language, and cultural context to produce an accurate translation.

Human translation is generally more expensive than automatic translation and can take longer to complete, but it offers several advantages:

- First, human translators can capture subtle nuances, such as sarcasm, humor, or double meaning, that

machines may struggle to understand. This makes human translation ideal for marketing or other types of texts where these nuances and translation quality are essential.

- Second, human translators specializing in a certain industry or field can bring their domain-specific knowledge to the translation. This is essential for highly technical texts where serious

consequences could result from a mistranslation, such as medical or legal documents.

- Third, human translators can accommodate special requests such as staying within a certain character limit—critical for user interface elements or social media posts, for example—or including specific keywords for search engine optimization (SEO) purposes.

- Last, human translators can steer away from literal translations that might sound odd or stilted in the target language and instead opt for a more appealing, natural-sounding translation. This proves especially important for marketing texts where the overall impact is more important than a phrase-for-phrase translation.

Machine translation

Machine translation (MT) involves using software to automatically convert text from the source language to the target language without any human input. Most modern machine translation tools use artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze the source text and generate an automatic translation that retains the original meaning.

- First, it's much faster than human translation, which makes it ideal for large projects where time is of the essence—for example, ecommerce businesses translating product descriptions en masse.

- Second, it's more affordable than human translation, which makes it a good option for businesses working with smaller budgets

and having to reduce translation costs where content has lower visibility, reach, and ROI.

- Third, machine translation offers automated integration with other software platforms and workflows, making it possible to run entire translation processes without any human involvement. This can be a major advantage for non-brand-oriented

content—such as internal documentation—where the goal is simply to make the content accessible to as many people as possible with minimal effort.

Some companies choose a hybrid approach that combines machine translation with human post-editing to get the best of both worlds.