10.1 Thinking Machines (a) (p. 244)

Defending the Computer's Translation

In case you're wondering how in the world the computer came up with some of these things, here are some very partial explanations.

• Real sausages are stuffed inside, let's face it, cleaned-out animal intestines, but we English speakers demurely call these things "sausage casings." Maybe the strong-of-stomach wouldn't mind having them called "intestines," but the computer, bless its little heart, translates them picturesquely as "bowels."

• The infinitive is used in French to produce a mild polite imperative. Thus when an English recipe would say "Place in bottom of fridge" a French one would say "Mettre au bas du frigo" (literally, "To put in the bottom of the fridge"). Our computer prefers to translate all the infinitives literally; thus "To chop the meat" instead of "Chop the meat," and so on.

Humans Translating Like Computers: The Duck/Chicken

But perhaps being able to translate well is too stiff a test to have to pass to prove the ability to think; after all, humans often fail that test. Here, for example, is an example of human translation, done no doubt by a human whose first language was Chinese, from a jar of preserved bean-curd made in China:

> 1 pcs. chicken, 4 pcs. preserved beancurd, some gingar, chive, salt, sugar, gourmet powder, syrup, perfume, wine. After wash, apply the preserved beaucurd, gingar, chive, salt, monosodium, sugar, syrup, perfume, wine into the bally of chicken, sew with iron needle. After scalded by boiling water, pour water on duck, apply the syrup on the skin. Hang it with cancel. Then roast the chicken for ripe and skinn turn into gold-red colour.

Among the many delights of this splendid recipe I especially enjoy that the chicken briefly turns into a duck halfway through.

Humans Translating Like Computers: English as She is Spoke

Pedro Carolino achieved immortality in 1883 with the publication of his English–Portuguese phrase book, despite the fact that its author had almost no command of English. He wrote it by translating a Portuguese expression into French, using a Portuguese-French dictionary, and then translating the French into English using a French-English dictionary. Here are some samples from his chapter "Familiar Phrases":

> *Have you say that?*
> *At what O'Clock Dine him?*
> *The thunderbolt is falling down.*
> *No budge you there.*
> *Dress your hairs.*
> *Will you a bon?*
> *Do not might one's understand to speak?*
> *These apricots and these peaches make me and to come water in mouth.*
> *I am pinking me with a pin.*
> *He do want to fall.*
> *He do the devil at four.*
> *Dry this wine.*
> *He laughs at my nose, he jest by me.*

and from "Idiotisms and Proverbs":

> *A bad arrangement is better than a process.*
> *Its are some blu stories.*
> *With a tongue one go to Roma.*
> *A horse baared don't look him the tooth.*
> *Take the occasion for the hairs.*
> *To do a wink to some body.*
> *Which like Bertram, love hir dog.*
> *The stone as roll not heap up not foam.*
> *He turns as a weath turcocl.*
> *He is beggar as a church rat.*
> *Friendship of a child is water into a basket.*
> *To craunch the marmoset.*

To buy cat in pocket.
To make paps for the cats.
To fatten the foot.
To come back at their muttons.

His book attracted a large delighted audience, and is available even today, republished under the title *English as She is Spoke*.

A friend of mine whose first language was German was pregnant and told by her doctor to get a blood test. In German, the word *nüchtern* means both *on an empty stomach* and *not drunk*. Assuming that a single word did both jobs in English, she asked the doctor whether she should arrive at the blood test sober.