

On the adoption and integration of machine translation by lawyers in Greece: some insights

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Abstract

The paper explores the use of machine translation by non-translation professionals (lawyers) in Greece, their motivations in using such technologies and their awareness of the associated risks.

Keywords: legal translation, machine translation, legal translator training, lawyers, non-professional users, survey.

Resumen

El artículo explora el uso de la traducción automática por parte de profesionales no traductores (abogados) en Grecia, sus motivaciones para utilizar estas tecnologías y su grado de concienciación sobre los riesgos asociados.

Palabras clave: traducción jurídica, traducción automática, formación de traductores jurídicos, abogados, usuarios no profesionales, encuesta.

Resum

L'article explora l'ús de la traducció automàtica per part de professionals no traductors (advocats) a Grècia, les motivacions per utilitzar aquestes tecnologies i el grau de consciència dels riscos associats.

Paraules clau: traducció jurídica, traducció automàtica, formació de traductors jurídics, advocats, usuaris no professionals, enquesta.

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1. Introduction

While the existing academic literature has examined the skills and competences of legal translators and, to a lesser degree, those of translating lawyers, what has been missing so far in the Greek context is an exploration of lawyers' actual use of digital tools for translation. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of said digital tools by lawyers, their motivations in using such and their awareness of the associated risks, in an effort to fine-tune legal translator training accordingly and effectively. We further seek to explore what tools are used and what factors influence decisions regarding use of machine translation (MT), especially from the perspective of risk awareness. Discussion about the present study started at the same time as discussion about designing and hosting an event about legal translation in Greece. The reason behind both was our wish to explore the current landscape and identify how MT developments were impacting practice. Those discussions led to the event Translating Europe Workshop (TEW): The Human Factor in Legal Translation, co-organised by the European Commission and the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The event took place on 28 March 2024 and included talks on topics such as a presentation of the legal translation landscape in Greece, a presentation of tools and aids for translating legal texts, the “who could/should translate or not” debate, working as a freelance legal translator, ethics, confidentiality and data protection, and the pivotal role of the human translator, as well as hands-on workshops.

2. Setting

Legal translation has been extensively explored from various perspectives: as an emerging field of study (Šarčević, 1997; Cao, 1997), in terms of legal language (Tiersma, 1999; Mattila, 2006), in terms of legal linguistics and jurilinguistics (Gémar, 2005), and with regard to its relationship to comparative law (Husa, 2011, 2015, 2022; Engberg, 2020), among others. Existing literature has tended to place a strong focus on law translated in institutional settings (Prieto Ramos & Guzmán, 2021; Svoboda et al., 2023) and, to a lesser degree, on what Scott has dubbed “outstitutional” settings (Scott, 2018; Biel et al., 2024). The role of technology and whether digital tools such as MT are suitable, or useful, for legal translation has increasingly been explored in recent years (see, for example, Weismann, 2019; Sosoni et al., 2022; Stefaniak, 2022; Killman, 2023). One topic, though, that appears to have garnered relatively little academic interest is the actual use of MT for legal translation purposes by end users from outside the language industries, in our case lawyers themselves, along with their views on such technologies. While reception studies have drawn increasing attention in other areas of translation studies (Orrego, 2018), more such studies in the realm of legal translation are clearly needed (O'Shea, 2024b).

There has also been persistent, ongoing and extensive debate on who could/should translate legal documents, who translates them better and what qualifications are needed (a background in law with knowledge of translation vs a background in translation with

knowledge of law) (Manganaras, 1996; Orlando, 2016, 2017; Scarpa, 2017; Lesznyák & Balogh, 2019), and various competence frameworks for legal translation have been proposed (for an overview, see Biel et al., 2024). Greece is a somewhat unusual case in this regard, in that it affords lawyers the right to translate and to certify the translations they provide without having strict requirements for language or translation competence (Krimpas, 2015). Indeed, Krimpas has pointed out that “the only prerequisite for lawyers [to translate] is to attest and certify (by their own declaration) sufficient competence in and knowledge of the foreign language” on the basis of the provisions of the Greek Lawyers’ Code (ibid.: 322).

There is a small but growing body of literature on the use of translation technology by legal translation students (see, for example, Giampieri, 2023a) and actual legal translation professionals (see, for example, Giampieri, 2023b; Sosoni et al., 2022; etc.), yet relatively little exploration of the use of MT and similar technologies by lawyers. One chapter of Giampieri’s book *Legal machine translation explained: MT in legal contexts* presents the results of a survey of Italian lawyers exploring their usage of MT and views on it. A total of 48 lawyers at international law firms responded to questions about usage of MT, reasons for usage, types of text translated, quality assurance approaches and awareness of risks. In a Polish context, Setkowicz-Ryszka (2024) has investigated the use of MT by lawyers in their academic writings while also exploring awareness of the risks the technology entails.

Regarding risk, as Duběda insightfully points out, “risk as a theoretical concept seems to have aroused interest in Translation Studies in the last decade; however, its empirical dimensions remain to be explored” (Duběda, 2024: 1). How translators approach the risk their task involves has been explored by Pym (2015), who initially identified three risk-related strategies among translators: risk avoidance (declining risky assignments), risk transfer (shifting risk to others, such as revisers), and risk acceptance (conscious assumption of risk). In 2018, enriching this typology, Pym & Matsushita also incorporated risk mitigation (actions that reduce potential harm). In a related vein, Duběda (2024) explored attitudes towards risk among legal translators in the Czech Republic and found that while most translators considered the translation of legal documents riskier than other sorts of translation, risk perception alters with time and exposure to (i.e. familiarisation with) legal documentation. Interestingly, his study appears to confirm Byrne’s finding (2007) that despite legal translation being considered “risky”, there is little litigation on this topic. O’Shea (2020, 2021) conducted two surveys among legal translators and translation agencies that offer legal translation services, and came to a similar conclusion to that reached by Byrne: litigation resulting from errors in legal translations is extremely infrequent to non-existent. This finding may seem puzzling, especially given that litigation is common in other areas of professional practice that may be considered similar to legal translation (such as engineering, medicine, etc.). However, there are numerous reasons why liability in action may be obscured from our sight and scrutiny. These include, *inter alia*, the application of contractual terms that impose penalties for mistakes in translations which are, of course, not publicly reported,

but do emerge in surveys of translators (see O'Shea, *ibid.*; Duběda, *ibid.*); non-disclosure agreements preventing the public release of information about liability/translation issues; out-of-court settlements of disputes; etc. (O'Shea, 2024). Another reason, it appears, may be a lack of concern among lawyers, as recipients of the translated documents, about the errors those documents may contain, or an inability to assess those errors due to inadequate or zero proficiency in the source language (Scott, 2018). Very little, though, has been written on lawyers' actual attitudes towards risk arising from legal translations. One of the few such works existing is the survey of Italian lawyers conducted by Giampieri referred to above (Giampieri, 2023b). One very tangible risk, discussed by Wahler (2018), is the possibility of malpractice suits against lawyers for their use of MT on legal documents. However, Giampieri reports that certain respondents in her survey felt the risk from the use of MT was almost non-existent because they were mostly using it for internal purposes, for assimilation of information rather than dissemination thereof.

3. Methodology

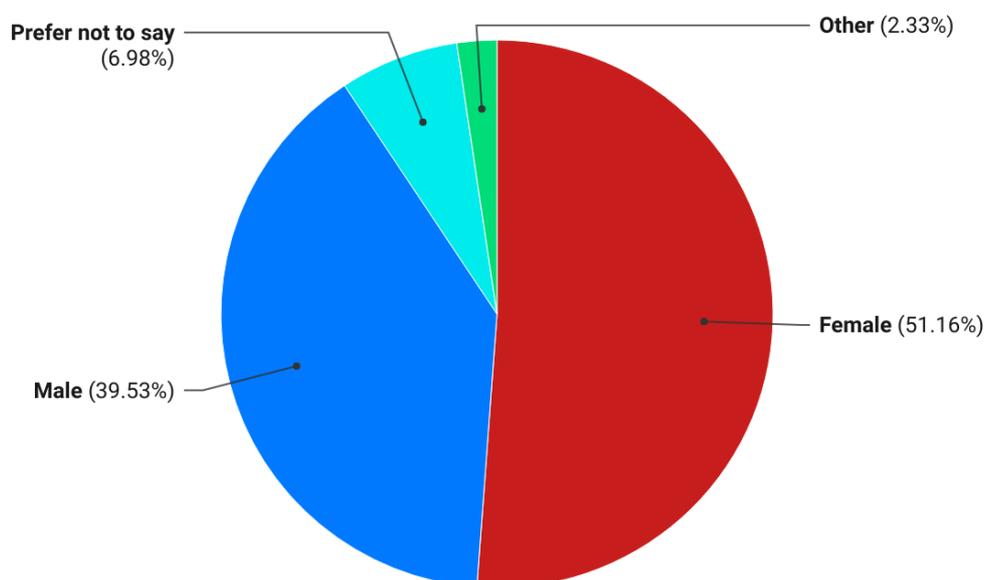
This study is based on the results of a modular survey whose items were replicated from a similar study conducted in Italy (Giampieri, 2023b) but adapted and modified to suit the Greek context. The survey was hosted by Aristotle University. It was disseminated employing the snowball method and was completely anonymous. E-mail messages were sent to all bar associations in Greece requesting that they share it with their registered members. Corresponding announcements were posted on major social media (Facebook, LinkedIn) where lawyers are known to have a strong presence. Those announcements were accompanied by an invitation to the Translating Europe Workshop event in order to maximise promotion of both the event and the survey. The survey included a set of personal profiling questions and was bifurcated, with one set of questions pertaining to lawyers who personally translate, and another set pertaining to lawyers who outsource translations to professional legal translators. It included questions on the use of MT, motivations for using it, quality assurance and awareness of the risks arising from the use of technology. Despite our effort to map as many aspects of lawyerly interactions with translation in Greece as possible, the section of the survey on outsourcing to humans attracted zero responses. The picture presented below therefore captures only the views and opinions of lawyers who personally translate documents. We deliberately limited the number of questions to a total of 31, mostly closed ones and a maximum of five open ones depending on respondents' profile, to minimise the time needed for survey completion (five to ten minutes), while ensuring that respondents would be provided with an opportunity to express their views. The results of closed questions are reported below. Open questions were analysed qualitatively (Bazeley, 2021). In reality, most respondents were only asked to answer a part of the bifurcated survey, that is, answer between five and 25 questions depending on their profile and their use of MT. Data was collected between March and June 2024. In all, 101 lawyers responded to the survey.

4. Survey results

4.1 Respondents' profile

We asked respondents to indicate their gender. This item was not mandatory. Almost three fifths of respondents (51.16%) identify themselves as female and two fifths (39.53%) as male (Fig. 1). Another 6.98% preferred not to reveal their gender and 2.33% identified as "other". The female dominance seen in the responses to the survey reflects the female dominance of the law profession in Greece overall. Data published in 2023¹ indicates that in 2022 Greece had 47,169 lawyers, 17,769 of whom were men (37.67%) and 29,400 women (62.33%).

Respondents' gender



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Figure 1

In terms of professional experience, the majority of respondents (51.16%) have up to 15 years of experience. It is worth noting that the single most prominent category is rather seasoned professionals with 16-20 years of experience (Fig. 2).

¹ <https://www.dikastiko.gr/eidhsh/plithorismos-dikigoron-me-aroma-gynaikas-27-046-to-2000-stoys-47-169-to-2022-oi-arithmoi-poy-deichnoyn-pos-den-yparchei-dikigoriko-brain-drain/>

Respondents' length of experience as lawyers

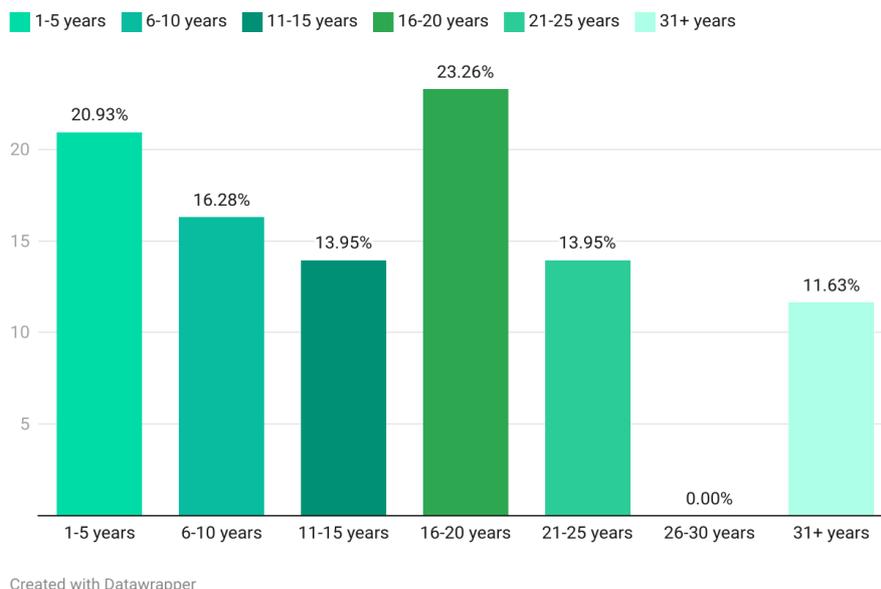


Figure 2

Most respondents in our sample report that they are self-employed (72.09%), in the sense that they run their own law firm, and only 27.91% are salaried employees in a law firm (Fig. 3). The fact that mostly self-employed lawyers replied to the survey might serve as an indication that they are the ones most interested in the topic and the results of the survey. From another perspective, it is plausible that the figures might have been affected by the fact that the data collection method involved dissemination to/through bar associations and social media, not law firms *per se*.

Work capacity

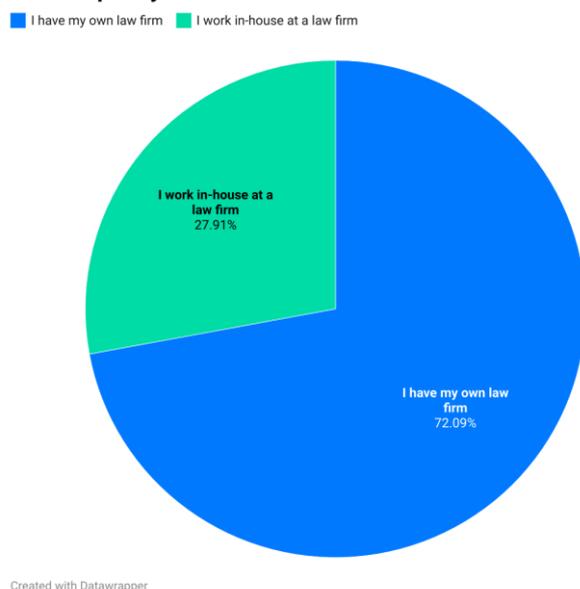


Figure 3

4.2 Use of legal translation

An overwhelming majority of respondents (95.35%) stated that they do, in fact, need legal translations in the course of their work (Fig. 4), a result which does not come as a surprise given their interest in the topic of the survey and its relevance to them.

Legal translations are needed in the course of my work

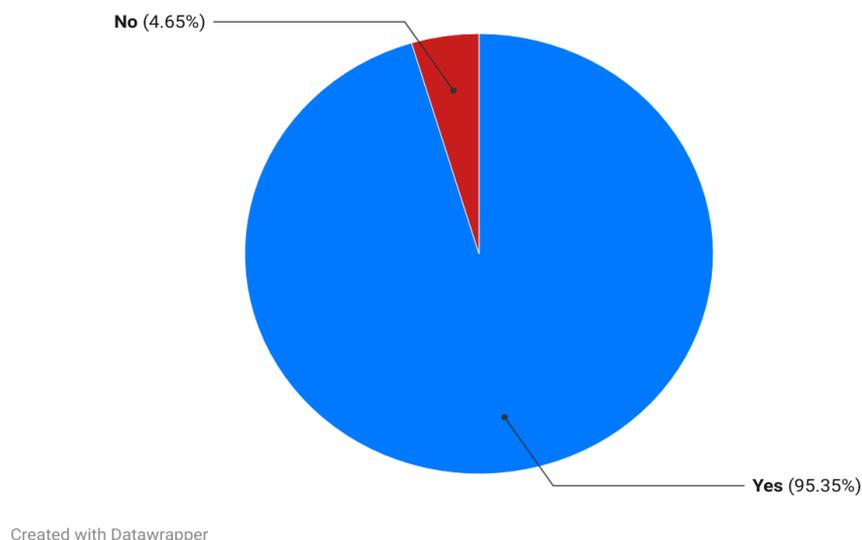
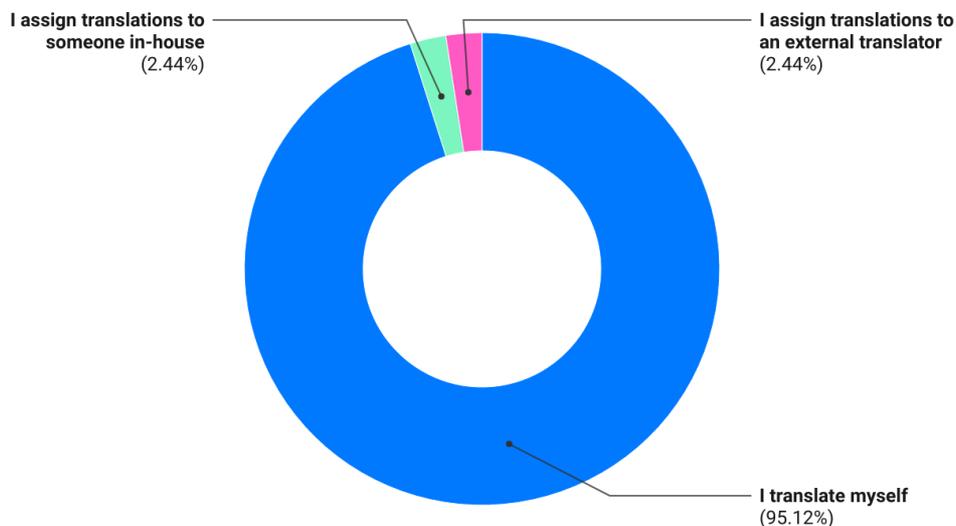


Figure 4

Most respondents who had stated that they do need legal translations in the course of their work also stated that they translate themselves (95.12%), placing them firmly in the category of “translating lawyer” mentioned above. Only a small fraction assign legal translation work to colleagues in-house (2.44%) or outsource translation work (2.44%; Fig. 5), indicating a strong preference for handling translation tasks themselves. We would point out that, although certain respondents indicated that they do in fact outsource legal translations, they did not opt to complete the other section of the survey on outsourced legal translation practices in Greece, with the result that this survey is unable to shed any light on lawyers’ attitudes to that sector of the market.

From our own professional experience we know that a considerable degree of outsourcing takes place. Numerous translation agencies in Greece advertise specialisation in legal translations, which constitutes indirect evidence of an active market for the services of legal translators. Indeed, at European level, translations of legal documents are the most sought-after types of translations. In a survey covering all of Europe, independent language professionals reported that legal translation was the largest translation vertical, and translation agencies reported it was the second largest for them (ELIS Report 2024: 30). A similar picture emerges in the UK, for which separate data is available, where in 2023 72% of translation agencies provided legal translation services (ATC, 2023: 19). No such granular data for the Greek market in legal translation services exists.

How I meet my legal translation needs



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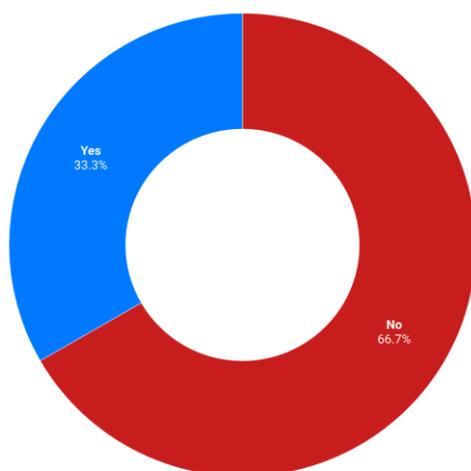
Figure 5

4.3 Use of MT for legal texts

The vast majority of respondents who need to translate legal documents in the course of their work do so manually. As can be seen in Fig. 6, MT is used by only one third of the respondents, indicating that even in 2024, eight years after the emergence of neural MT, uptake of this technology by Greek lawyers remains low.

I use MT when translating legal documents

■ No ■ Yes



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Figure 6

Lawyers were also asked which MT platform(s) they preferred using. They could choose from among Google Translate, DeepL, Yandex, Microsoft MT and MateCat, and also had

the option of adding another platform. Google Translate is the dominant platform, used by 73.33% of respondents (Fig. 7), followed by DeepL (26.67%). Respondents did not indicate any other platform or make use of the option to add another, a perhaps unsurprising result given the relatively low level of MT use among respondents to this survey.

I use ...

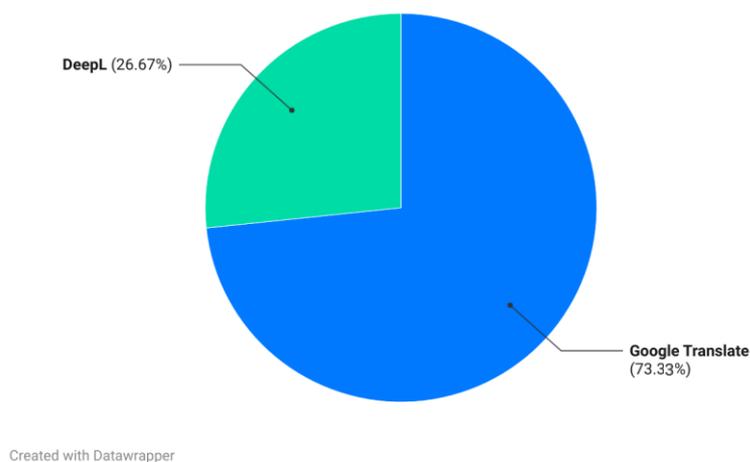


Figure 7

We then asked about the frequency with which MT is used, although only a small number of respondents replied to this question (N=13). Of those who responded, the majority indicated that their MT use was occasional (61.55%), while only 23.08% indicated that they used it all the time and 15.39% that they used it often (Fig. 8).

Frequency of MT use

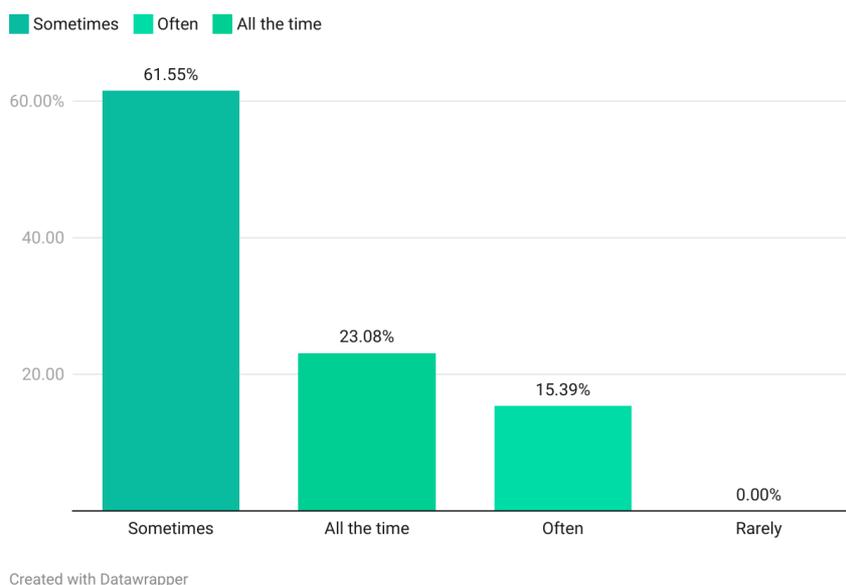


Figure 8

4.4 Motivations for using MT

We then sought to explore how lawyers in Greece translate with MT. Half of the lawyers who use MT in their work stated that they use it to translate both from and into a foreign language (50.01%; Fig. 9) whereas just under a fifth (18.76%) use it to translate *only* into a second language. Languages mentioned by a small number of respondents (N=9) include mainly English and German, although French, Italian and Spanish are also referred to. Interestingly, less than a third use it to translate into Greek (31.26%), which is their own native language.

What I use MT for

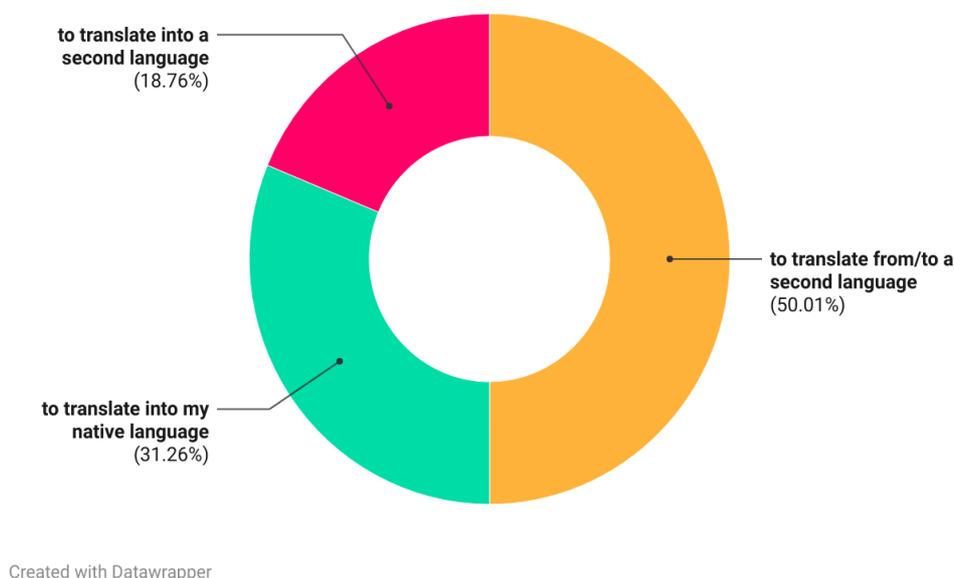
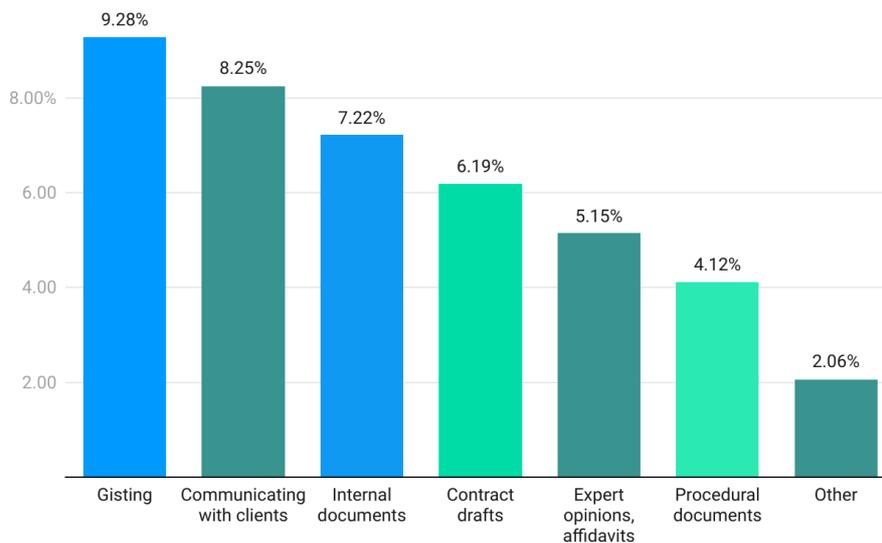


Figure 9

We then asked what they use MT for. Multiple responses were allowed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most popular use of MT by respondents was gisting in general (9.28%), followed by communication with clients abroad (8.25%), documents for internal use (7.22%), and understanding drafts of contracts (6.19%). Other uses were more oriented towards procedural aspects of the practice of law (translations of expert reports, affidavits (5.15%), and procedural documents (4.12%)) (Fig. 10).

Reasons for using MT

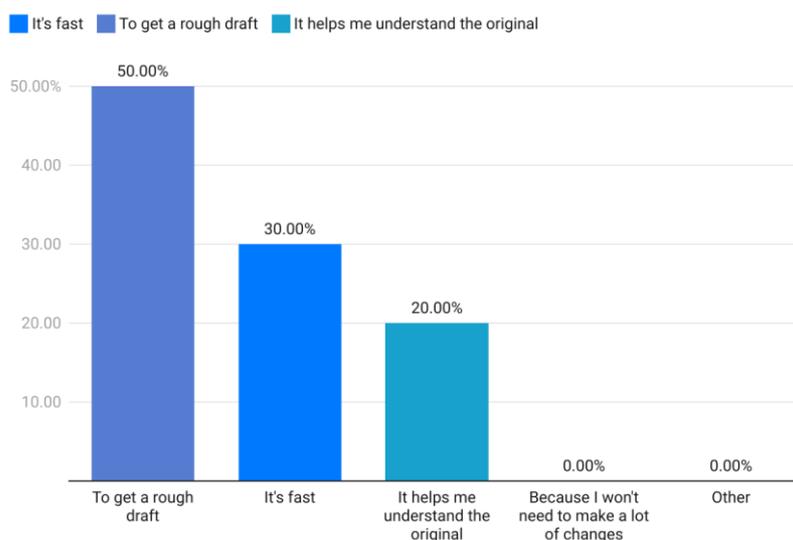


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Figure 10

In a similar vein, we explored their motivations for using MT. Again, multiple responses were allowed. It seems that most respondents use MT to save time one way or another: 50% use it to get a rough draft, another 30% use it because it is fast, while one fifth use it as an aid to comprehending the original document (Fig. 11).

Why I use MT ...



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Figure 11

4.5 Quality assurance and risk

The next topic explored in the questions relates to issues of quality assurance when using MT, error sensitivity and awareness of the risks that use of the technology poses. The majority of the respondents who use MT ensure quality by editing the output themselves (80.12%; Fig. 12).² Another 13.36% use a colleague in-house to check the output and fix it. It is worth noting that none of the respondents reported utilising the editing services of professional translators or editing by some other subject-matter expert.

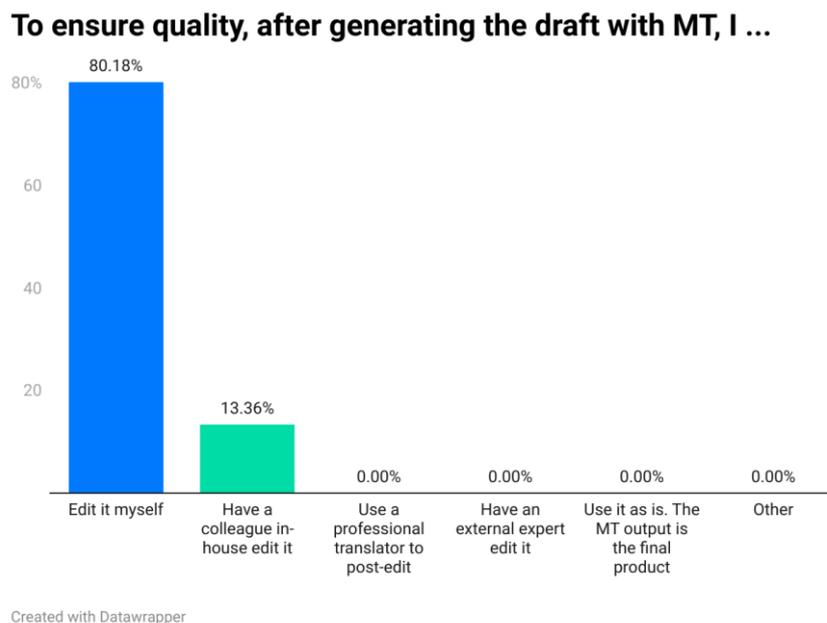


Figure 12

Respondents who use MT for legal translations report a number of errors in the MT output. Legal terminology seems to be the error category mostly noticed (25%), followed by legal phraseology (20.84%) and errors in grammar and syntax (20.84%; Fig. 13)³.

² Numbers do not add up to 100% because some participants skipped this question.

³ Numbers do not add up to 100% because some participants skipped this question.

Most common errors observed

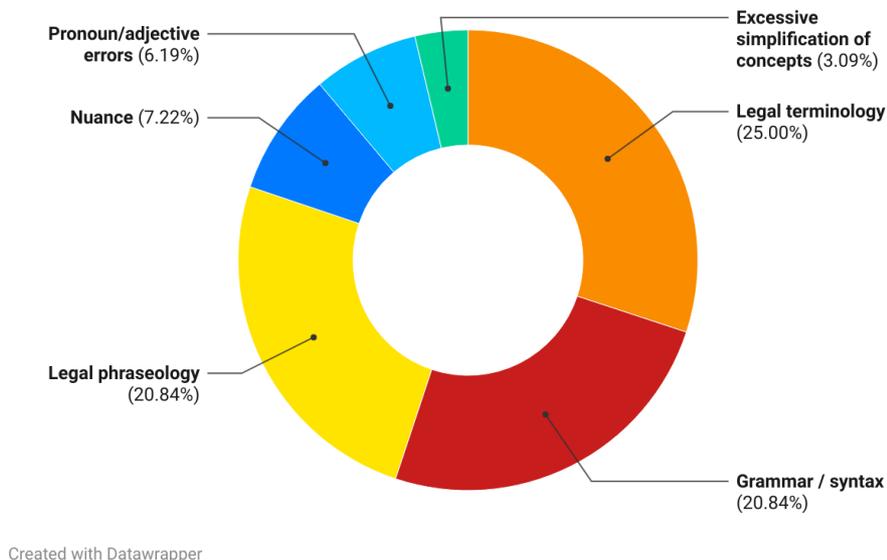


Figure 13

Respondents seem to be generally aware of MT-related dangers and acknowledge this in their replies. Indeed, 35.72% of them are aware they might be breaching confidentiality clauses by using MT systems, yet, interestingly enough, none of them are afraid they might be sued for this. Around one fifth indicate they are aware that by using MT they could be breaching copyright in the source documents, while 14.28% are aware that translated documents generated using MT systems may not be admissible in evidence and usable before the courts (Fig. 14).

I'm aware that by using MT I ...

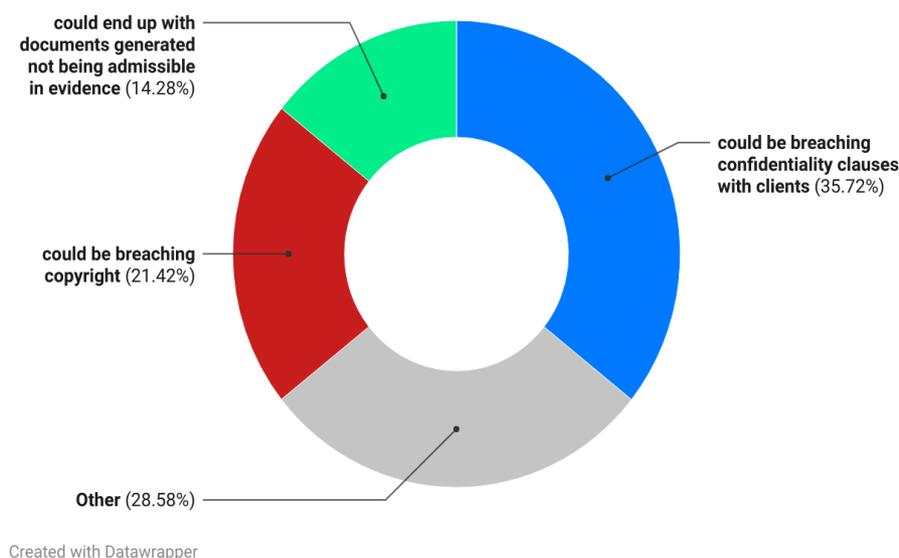


Figure 14

5. Discussion

5.1 On legal translations in general

Our sample takes a rather traditional approach to translation in that most respondents who need translations (95.12%) seem to be “translating lawyers”, translating material themselves rather than outsourcing, and the majority of them — two thirds — translate manually. There is no relevant data from the Italian and the Polish studies and it might be interesting to explore what the situation is in other countries given the paucity of studies on this topic.

5.2 On adoption and integration of MT

Data points to a low degree of adoption of MT. It is worth noting that out of the few lawyers using MT, only just over two fifths of them use it all the time or, at least, often. The few respondents who use MT mostly do so for gisting and communication with clients abroad rather than for more procedural aspects of the practice of law, and one interpretation might be that MT is preferably used for low-risk rather than high-stakes translation tasks. They seem to be motivated to use MT for reasons of convenience, mainly to save time by obtaining either a rough draft or immediate results. It is unclear, however, whether the objective of saving time is achieved, especially when the concept of quality is taken into account.

More specifically, regarding MT and frequency of use, the majority of the few lawyers who replied to these questions indicated that MT use was occasional (61.55%). Another 15.39% indicated that they used it often, while 23.08% indicated that they used it all the time. In Giampieri's study, just 31% reported using MT sometimes, in contrast to their Greek colleagues (61.55%), while 17% of the Italian respondents reported using it often, similarly to their Greek colleagues. The main difference is that roughly half of the Italian respondents (48%) said they use MT only rarely, which is why Giampieri states that “it can be inferred that the attested use of MT by lawyers is not particularly intensive” (Giampieri, 2023b: 127). The study by Setkowicz-Ryszka (2024) had a different approach in that it explored the use of MT by lawyers in the context of their academic writings while also examining awareness of the risks the technology entails. Lawyers in Poland seem to use MT even less than their Greek and Italian colleagues, with 3% of them stating they use MT on a daily basis and 32% stating they use it a few times a week.

Tasks for MT seem to be similar in both the Greek and the Italian group. Giampieri (2023b) mentions that most lawyers use MT for gisting, for internal documents and to communicate more efficiently with foreign clients as well. The overall impression is that, when combined with the low usage level reported by respondents in Greece, MT appears to be a crutch, helping lawyers in day-to-day activities, rather than a key tool for translating large volumes of documents. It has to be noted that such large volumes of documents may not, in fact, exist in the first place, if lawyers are self-employed and not

exclusively and systematically undertaking translation work themselves. Irrespective of the volume of translation work they receive, they do not seem to rely heavily on MT yet.

5.3 On quality and risk

Regarding translation quality and quality assurance, unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents follow a traditional approach and check/edit translations themselves. It is worth noting that none of the respondents report utilising the editing services of professional translators or editing by some other subject-matter expert. It seems that respondents are, unconsciously, in tune with Pym (2025: 56), who posits that human translation will be needed in high-stakes situations — in our case, law settings — “where the risks of automation do outweigh the benefits”, which, in our context, fits with the fact that respondents edit translations themselves, have the final say and assume responsibility by “signing-off” their translation products.

Another point of interest is that “post-editing” is not mentioned in any reply/comment and this makes us wonder whether respondents are aware of the concept and the practices associated with it. This finding may be justified by the fact that lawyers, who act as non-professional translators and come from outside the language industry, may not be aware of the translation-related nomenclature and the term “post-editing” specifically. This, in turn, makes us think that familiarisation with such concepts should be encouraged for people who do not come from the language industry.

Surprisingly enough, none of the respondents report being afraid of being sued for issues related to the (inappropriate) use of MT, even though a rather high percentage of them (35.72%) seem to be generally aware of possible dangers, such as confidentiality and copyright issues, and acknowledge this in their replies. The risk is real and high, with Giampieri (2023b: 31-32) arguing that:

As concerns malpractice suits, there is a common view among scholars who assert that machine translation should be considered very cautiously by lawyers. [...] the risk for lawyers to be brought to court for breaches of confidentiality may be high if they use machine translation inappropriately or recklessly. For this reason, lawyers using machine translation to translate their clients' documents are often found in breach of their duty of care (Wahler 2018, 112), or of their non-disclosure obligations (Scott 2017).

5.4 Limitations

We were expecting a higher response rate given the total population of lawyers in Greece and our efforts to contact them. It should be taken into account that the actual number of suitable and potential respondents is much lower than the total population, since the survey was addressed only to those lawyers who require translations in the course of their work. Even though the results of the study may not be considered appropriate to extrapolate from given that we only had 101 responses, they do provide insights into the landscape of legal translation in Greece and highlight trends.

The study is compromised by the fact that several respondents did not submit answers to entire sections of the survey, so we report only on the sections we had data from.

Another issue is that results themselves may now be out of date to a certain extent due to fast-paced technological developments in the interim. Another question that might arise is why questions on generative AI tools were not included in the survey even though it was conducted in the second quarter of 2024. The fact is that, based on discussions we had with lawyers during the survey design phase, we did not anticipate that lawyers would be using generative AI tools for translation purposes back then.

6. Conclusions

This paper sought to analyse MT use by Greek lawyers, exploring both the drivers of its adoption and their perception of the potential risks. The findings sketch a picture where lawyers run a rather tight translation ship by translating and editing themselves. A total of 38.47% of the few lawyers who reported using MT use it frequently. Those lawyers mainly use Google Translate or DeepL for their work and are aware of several limitations, such as grammatical errors or issues in terminology that may ensue. They seem to be using MT mainly for gist, comprehension and communication purposes rather than more high-risk law-related tasks. They are more at the assimilation end of the cline than the dissemination end. And, although several highlight awareness of confidentiality and copyright issues, most of them seem to overlook the risk.

The present preliminary exploration provided us with less data than expected. Given the significance of the issue, i.e. the improvement of legal translations through provision of appropriate and effective training encompassing translation technologies to those lawyers who are involved in translation work, a wider study is needed, one that might be expanded to include lawyers from other countries, since findings from the Italian and the Polish landscapes imply a rather low level of adoption of MT as well.

Remedial and/or post-mortem action might include the following:

- approaching prospective respondents directly instead of relying on the snowball effect in order to increase the response rate;
- remodelling the original survey in order to avoid incomplete sections;
- remodelling the original survey in order to include questions pertinent to generative AI tools given current developments.

At the same time, the study does point to certain issues we need to shed more light on in order to identify gaps in legal translator training that we might want to face head on. One of the findings and possible hints for the wider population of lawyers is the low MT adoption and integration rate. This might be enough to warrant the design of a course on legal translation with a strong technological component, albeit with scaffolding tasks in order to ensure a smooth transition from the rather traditional/manual approach evidenced in the current limited sample to a more technologically-enhanced, confident and possibly less technophobic approach. A presentation and hands-on tasks with available tools would familiarise participants with the variety thereof and help them choose the ones most useful for their environment. On the basis of hints from the

present study, that same course would also benefit from a section familiarising lawyers with translation-related concepts, as well as from a “critical evaluation” section where participants would be exposed to a variety of tasks and scenarios and assess in which cases the use of MT is beneficial, required or even permitted. That section could be complemented by another two sections: one on post-editing, for participants to streamline and systematise their edits when using MT, and another one on ethical use of MT, also in combination with risk management. And it is in such courses where professional translators are best poised to act as educators (Ehrensberger-Dow, 2023: 394) and offer guidance.

7. Author contributions

Conceptualization: KK, JOS (equal); Data curation: KK; Formal analysis: KK, JOS (equal); Investigation: KK, JOS (equal); Methodology: KK, JOS (equal); Project administration: KK, JOS (equal); Supervision: KK, JOS (equal); Validation: KK, JOS (equal); Visualization: JOS; Writing-original draft: KK, JOS (equal); Writing-review & editing: KK, JOS (equal).

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