

## The Limits of Technology

*Patricia May is president and CEO of Precision Language Services in Lakeville, which provides translation services in more than 75 languages.*

**I've seen enough sci-fi movies to know that computers can take over the world. So why can't they translate languages?**



**Patricia May**

One of the things we hear often is 'How hard can [translating] be?' People think you can just open up a dictionary and replace each English word with a German word, but it's not that simple. The two languages have different grammatical structures . . . . [Digital translation] might give you a vague idea of what something is about, but you wouldn't want to use it if you were trying to write something for publication.

### **How badly can things get translated?**

Once—not here, thank heavens—the phrase 'three strikes and you're out' was translated to 'if the boss hits you three times, you can quit.'

### **That seems like sage advice, actually. So are computers useful at all in the translation business?**

Yes. We use TM [translation memory programs], which can pick up when a phrase is used a certain way or things are being described in a way that has been translated before. It can save a lot of time. But that still assumes that somebody translated it right the first time.