

Translation memory: Friend or Foe?

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Sometime in the early 1990s, at the American Translators Association conference in Philadelphia, I attended a session on the emerging field of machine translation. I could sense the excitement in the room at the horizons opened by computer technology, and I remember saying that we were witnessing the dawn of our profession's industrial revolution. Today, a few hours after that dawn, the revolution is in full swing.

As it turns out, it is not machine translation that has transformed the profession, but its offspring, translation memory (TM). Insofar as machine translation is patterned on human mental processes, its artificial intelligence requirements have not been easy to meet. On the other hand, as the capabilities of computerised data storage and retrieval developed at an extraordinary pace, and as more and more of the material proposed for translation grew to be repetitive, it became clear that the two were made for each other.

The upshot was TM, which in its simplest description consists of a two-column table: one column contains sentences in source language, and the other the corresponding translation of these sentences. In application, the sentences of a new text to be translated are compared to the source sentences in the table: if a match is found, the corresponding translation is then inserted in the text.

Promising at first sight, TM has carried the profession into uncharted territory and has raised unexpected problems that remain to be examined and solved. But once Pandora's box has been opened, the question becomes: how can we best live with it and what new opportunities does it offer to free-lance translators?

From a user's standpoint, the simplified TM description above no longer fits, thanks to an inevitable influx of additional functions. Current TM programs call upon ancillary skills totally unrelated to the translation craft: the software is complex, it presents non-trivial learning curves, is the subject of specialised training sessions, and requires a significant investment of time and money.

For translation companies, driven by competition and tight deadlines to prioritise high productivity, TM has become indispensable, with consequent difficulties in staffing and contractor relations: in-house personnel needs to be rapidly trained, new employees need to be hired, pricing criteria need to be redefined, and contractors with the necessary skills and software need to be found.

But it is for freelance translators that TM creates the most serious dilemma, confronting them with a

choice among several career paths.

Translators who consider that they have only one life to live and want to live it as translators, who choose to remain in the mainstream of traditional translation, can disregard TM, given that the latter is primarily useful for repetitive publications, controlled language texts, and so on. In the foreseeable future, the material in this mainstream sector of the profession will continue to require the sensitivity that only human intervention can provide.

Aside from that, there are two models of TM usage by free-lancers.

One model is the use of TM as a personal tool in the expectation of higher efficiency, a choice generally made by those who specialise in material suitable for TM processing. They draw upon TM as any one of their software resources, using it judiciously and at their discretion. The consensus among these translators is that they are satisfied with the advertised benefits: speed, consistency, glossary development, etc. They find that the money and time spent on TM software were worthwhile investments, investments they recovered surprisingly fast. They may not agree on the relative merits of the different programs available on the market, but that is another matter...

The other model is the use of TM dictated and controlled by the client, which is where the greatest resistance to the technology has been felt, for a number of reasons.

First of all because the material is segmented. Sections or words that have already been processed are interspersed with those that remain to be translated, a discontinuity that distorts the analysis, the association of ideas, the context, essential to good translation. What is more, translators working on new material are forced to adopt the style, the wording, of pre-translated material, an inhibiting constraint at best.

Secondly, because the machine processing tasks and administrative procedures associated with TM are inflexible. Since these elements are not translation-related, they impose an overhead burden on translators' operations, along with the awareness that human decision is being superseded by binary expediency, the consciousness of relinquished control.

Thirdly, because cost is the major factor in the high productivity that clients expect from TM. Words are thus remunerated at different rates depending on their degree of processing, stripped of their meaning as language, reduced to articles of commerce. Translation thereby acquires the trivial function of transposition.

Thus, many translators resent being asked to accept TM as a condition of employment, reject the imposition of inflexible working conditions, and refuse to engage in the minutiae of TM rate negotiations. In other words, they do not wish to engage in assembly-line work.

There is no straightforward, single solution to these problems. Nevertheless, one constructive course is to recognise that symbiosis between client and freelancer is essential. For instance, the client must form and consult translation teams at the early planning stages of a project, so as to establish realistic procedures and schedules: the difficulties created by the absence of such communication are ultimately more expensive to resolve than the cost of an initial collaborative effort. By the same token, translators who choose to work in the TM field need to obtain the necessary computer tools, develop expertise in their application, and adopt an attitude: they need to view themselves not as machine operators, but rather as precision machinists with sophisticated

skills. And with that image in mind, for the sake of the profession, they must prevent the perpetuation of bad translation memories by declining assignments that contain them.

With the understanding that TM processing is significantly different from conventional translation, and that it is an irreversible phenomenon, comes the realisation that the demand for TM specialists can only grow, both as freelancers and as in-house staffers, and that the choice of becoming a TM specialist becomes a viable career alternative. It is probable that in the not too distant future, we will see a migration, a diaspora of translators moving into that specialty, weighed down by gigabytes of memory, and by all the software they can carry.

Along with the above, this rapidly developing situation deserves a more thorough debate than an article such as this can provide, perhaps through the organisation of an ad-hoc conference on the subject, preferably in the San Francisco Bay Area. ■