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The Impact of Translation Memory Tools on the Translation Profession

by Ahmed Saleh Elimam

Abstract

For different reasons, Translation Memory (TM) tools have become both indispensable and popular. They have caused a sweeping change in the translation market. Translators are no longer restricted to hardcopy dictionaries and glossaries; they can now use online and electronic resources. In addition to all the benefits TM have brought about for translators, translation agencies and clients, they also have some inherent shortcomings. In this article I will explore both advantages and disadvantages of TM for these parties. I will also explain the change TM brought about in the translator's working methods.

In order to conserve time, money and quality, Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tools, including Translation Memory (TM), have become very popular with translators, translation agencies, and clients. While TM has its advantages and disadvantages for the translator and the translation bureau, it has advantages and virtually no disadvantages for clients.

First, as far as the translator is concerned, the great advantage of TM is in the area of translation quality. The quality is likely to improve in terms of consistency, both in the same document and across documents. TM saves pairs of terms or strings of texts, and reproduces them when the same SL term or string comes along in any other position in the document being translated. This, therefore, helps the translator to maintain consistency by always using the same equivalent for the same term or string. In other words, the translation becomes more efficient and consistent. In addition,

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a translator can always use the same TM with future translations, albeit from the same client, and hence achieve consistency in terms of terminology and style across translation jobs.

Second, "Terminology mining is said to account for 75 percent of a translator's time" (Arntz & Picht, 1989:234 in Austermuhl, 2001). TM saves the translator's time by sparing him/her the need to look up the terms and words again if they are repeated in the text, especially in the case of large documents, or in another translation from the same client or in the same field of specialization. The translator will translate repeated terms and strings only once and TM will 'translate' them whenever they come up again in the SL which, therefore, saves time. TM also spares the translator from the need to strain his/her memory to remember how s/he translated a certain term or string before or the need to go back through the document, albeit in long documents, to locate it. On the other hand, if TM is provided with the translation job, s/he will simply choose the equivalent used in the TM without need to 'researching' which equivalent to use especially where synonymous or semi-synonymous equivalents exist, which is quite often the case. For example, the translator may not know whether to use 'Sexually Transmitted Disease' or 'Sexually Transmitted Infection', and this is where the role of TM comes in to decide which equivalent has been used before and to maintain consistency. Consistency means better quality which, in turn, means the client will be happy with the translation and will thus be more likely to consider the translator for future jobs.

Third, by saving the translator's time, TM increases his/her productivity which can lead to an increase in income. Further, more and more clients now are not only aware of but also require that their work be translated by TM software. In other words, the use of TM makes a translator more competitive by being distinguished from the others who do not use TM, and more likely to receive work. Finally, TM is quite portable. A translator can, literally, move easily around with all his/her translation resources on a CD or a 'Memory Stick'.

However, TM has its own disadvantages for a translator. First of all, s/he will have to invest a considerable amount of money to obtain the software and to put some time and effort into learning how to use it. Furthermore, especially at the early stages of use, the translator will always need to refer to the manual or ask experienced colleagues about the technical difficulties s/he may encounter, which means loss of valuable time.

In most programs using TM, a translator will only see a few sentences, strings or one paragraph on the screen at a time during the translation process. Therefore, s/he will only be able to work on that sentence, string or, at best, paragraph level and therefore may be translating out of context. As a result s/he may need to change some of his/her translations afterwards, which again means wasting some more time depending on how many corrections s/he needs to introduce in the translation. There may also be a risk of too much

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consistency in the translation. TM can adversely affect the translator's search for other, and perhaps better, equivalents and restrict him/her to use the same equivalent throughout the document even if there is a better alternative. In addition, if the translator delivers the TM together with the job, this can make the client less dependent on the same translator for future work, since the client can always give a new translator the TM they have received from previous translations together with the job. In other words, while promising a translator an opportunity of more work, TM still carries with it some inherent risks.

For the translation bureau, which manages the translation project for the client, TM also has some pros and cons. On the positive side, as has already been pointed out, more clients now request that their work be translated using TM. This means that having TM will help the bureau secure jobs that could have been lost otherwise. More work means more income. Furthermore, in cases of large translations which are normally divided among several translators, agencies can better proofread and project-manage the work with the use of TM. In the case of a ST being translated to more than one language, a bureau can manage the different target texts (TT's) quite easily and update its own TM accordingly. Other advantages of TM include the fact that agencies will be able to offer competitive prices for translation and can recruit several translators for the same job without fearing loss of consistency when all use the same TM. The only disadvantage of TM for agencies, in my opinion, is that a bureau will have to invest in the purchase of the software and its yearly updates and this outlay is usually high.

From a client's point of view, TM gives them the freedom to use different translators and translation agencies for future translation tasks. Consistency with previous translations is still maintained since clients can always request TM to be handed over with the translation and can later provide it to new translators to use and update. More important is that the client may be able to negotiate a lower fee when they provide TM along with the text to be translated. They may only pay full price for no matches but less (60 to 70%, for example) for fuzzy matches and even less for complete matches (30%, for example). The turnaround time, a major concern for clients, will be quicker because translators work faster and agencies manage the project more effectively. In short, the client has everything to gain and nothing to lose.

From the above one can say that TM may only be used with technical documents where there is a certain amount of repetition. For example, manuals, brochures and balance sheets contain a considerable number of repetitions and also need to be updated quite often. This is where TM comes in to achieve consistency and efficiency. On the other hand, TMs are not likely to be used with literary texts where the context plays a more important role compared to non-literary texts. Literary texts are also characterized by their figurative language which makes them difficult to translate with TM. Finally, literary texts do not seem to have the same amount of repetition as technical texts.

The Impact of TM on the Translator's Working Methods

Pros and cons aside, let us now look at the impact of TM on the translator's working methods. Austermuhl (2001) thinks that "more than any other professionals, translators are feeling the long-term changes brought about by the information age. The snowballing acceleration of available information, [and] the increase in intercultural encounters ... have resulted in drastic and lasting changes in the way translators work." Therefore, the question now for translators is not whether to use electronic tools or not but rather which tools to buy, learn, and use. Electronic dictionaries, glossaries and other resources have an edge over hard copies because they are easy to update and research. In fact some encyclopaedias and scientific journals are no longer published in print but are only delivered digitally (*ibid*: 102).

With the domination of English over other languages in the world of business, science, and technology, it is not surprising that more translators are now needed than ever before. The volume of translations being carried out each year from English into other languages is huge and worth billions of dollars. In addition, the expansion of the Internet and the computerization of the global economy have changed the way business is being conducted and emphasize the need for more effective and, undoubtedly, faster methods of translation, making full use of the huge amount of data available online. The influence of specialization and diversification, often referred to as the 'information explosion,' is also obvious as the amount of information available is now far greater than ever before and beyond the capacity of the available human brainpower to handle.

With TM the translator switches from the traditional method of looking up words and terms in hard-copy dictionaries, manuals and other written materials and perhaps maintaining hard-copy glossaries, to the world of online resources. A translator can tour national libraries, virtual bookstores, multilingual databases, newspaper and magazine archives, and other sites online, available at his/her fingertips, build up his/her own glossaries and attach them to the TM to enhance its performance. In addition, by developing his/her IT skills, a translator switches from translating only hard-copy documents to the fields of software localization, web page translation, and handling different electronic formats. S/he becomes more competitive because of the range of services s/he offers. As a knowledge-based activity, translation requires new strategies and a "paradigm shift in methodology. This shift must embrace practice, teaching and research" Austermuhl (2001). A translator is no longer someone sitting at a desk with a pen in hand, sheets of paper before him/her and a number of dictionaries within reach. S/he has become a person using a computer, or perhaps carrying a laptop, on which s/he has installed, among other things, several online dictionaries and glossaries. The translator is also someone who uses TM software and has very good IT skills. Translators now receive work electronically in different formats. This is in short the

effect of TM on the work of the translator.

In conclusion, TMs have become popular with translators, agencies and clients because they save time and promote better quality and efficiency. Unlike translators and agencies who derive some gains but also some losses from the use of TM, clients only have gains: shorter turnaround, lower cost, and less dependency on the translator/translation bureau. Of all the advantages they have brought about to the translator, TMs have had a great impact on the way translators work now. Translators are now able to make better use of the available resources: electronic dictionaries and glossaries, and spelling checkers. TMs have equipped translators to handle the information explosion in all areas of human endeavor more efficiently than the human brain alone ever could.

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