Free Translation Memory: "Not a Bad Vision"

Lionbridge Releases Translation Technology

by   Bert Esselink

Lionbridge Technologies has recently announced that an essential part of its technology, the ForeignDesk suite of translation memory (TM) tools, will be further developed and distributed as "open source" code. All source code, applications, and supporting documentation will be distributed through the Web, free of charge.

Language International met up with Henri Broekmate, Vice President, Product Development & Marketing, to ask him about this new initiative.

Language International: Can you briefly explain what open source is?

Henri Broekmate: In a nutshell, open sourcing is publishing a software product on the Web in source and object code form for free distribution. The general idea is that the development community at large will enhance, modify and improve a product more rapidly than a small group of dedicated engineers. Also, the creation of

derivative applications and inclusion of the open source code into larger, more complex applications allows the technology to spread rapidly and set a standard.

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There are quite a few different license arrangements that differ in the way intellectual property is protected, can be

distributed, etc. Detailed information is available on www.osdn.com. We at Lionbridge Technologies elected to go with the Berkeley Software Distribution license in order to ensure the most efficient use of the code.

LI: Why has Lionbridge decided to release its technology to the public?

HB: We have decided to open source our ForeignDesk suite of products to rapidly create a free, publicly available standard in the area of Translation Memory (TM) technology. It is our belief that TM front-end technology no longer offers a competitive advantage per se—it's become "featurized", part of the cost of doing business. We will be concentrating more on the back-end, i.e. translation memory *management* and scalable next generation technologies, such as Example Based Machine Translation (EBMT) and MT proper, as well as on transaction cost cut-

ting technologies such as content management connectors, collaboration products and workflow rather than on the frontend. ForeignDesk is a mature product that contains a number of unique, industry-first patented and patent pending components that will be of great benefit to end users as well as to developers who elect to integrate part of the product into their technology.

LI: Which technology components are released as open source, and what technology will be kept by Lionbridge?

HB: We will open source a version of the ForeignDesk product suite that is optimized for the localization of Microsoft .Net binary assemblies, but that also handles other formats. For readers interested in technical specifications, a white paper can be found on the Lionbridge corporate web site. By the way, the .Net parser, written in C#, is very open and pluggable so, with the source code being available, developers can use it and integrate it into their own applications.

For completeness' sake, we currently do not plan to open source other components of our Lionbridge Globalization Platform. Once our other technologies reach a phase where they are ready to be featurized into larger systems, in the same way in which we expect translation memory to become a feature of globalized content management systems, we will consider the option once again.

LI: Who will benefit most from this initiative?

HB: Three groups stand to benefit, in our opinion. First, the end users of TM technology, who now have access to a robust, free TM product they can install and use to produce translations of cutting-edge formats.

Second, the development community in the globalization sector, and in related industries such as content management and software publishing. These parties will be able to create derivative works to include in their own applications, thereby improving the latter's globalization quotient.

Third, Lionbridge expects to benefit to the extent that the ForeignDesk technology will continue to evolve in the public market, while we concentrate our R&D efforts on creating next generation back-end applications.

LI: According to the Open Source Initiative at www.opensource.org, "We in the open source community have learned that this rapid evolu-

tionary process produces better software than the traditional closed model." Does this mean that once developers pick up the ForeignDesk technology, there may soon be a free translation tool that is better than all other commercial TM tools in the market?**

HB: Absolutely. That is our goal. We expect the technology to be improved and spread rapidly. The existing providers of commercial TM technology will be forced to push the technology envelope harder, which will certainly benefit the industry.

LI: Can ForeignDesk easily be used by universities to assist training in computational linguistics or translation technology?

HB: Of course, universities will have access to the technology under the open source paradigm as well. A fully functional product is downloadable from www.foreigndesk.net..

LI: How will users get support for the open source technology they use?

HB: As is common under the open source paradigm, the user community will have to support itself. Sourceforge.net offers bug tracking, feature request and discussion threading features that users will need to keep an informed discussion going.

LI: The best-known open source product, Linux, is commercially developed, deployed, and managed by companies such as Red Hat. Do you envision other tool producers to take the best pieces of ForeignDesk and

sell them as part of their own product?**

HB: I wouldn't be surprised. As I mentioned earlier, ForeignDesk has certain unique components, including patented fuzzy-matching technology that will benefit many applications in the globalization arena and beyond.

LI: If your open source initiative is a success, how do you envision the role of ForeignDesk in the translation and localization community five years from now?

HB: Well, if I were truly a visionary, I'd probably already be long retired and devoting my life to family and philanthropy. All kidding aside, if the open source initiative takes hold in the way we anticipate it to, ForeignDesk will evolve into a desktop TM test bed that developers and users alike will use to implement support for leading edge formats. It will be a low-cost alternative for end users and a rapid development kit for developers. Not a bad vision.

Henri Broekmate

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