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Translation management for multi-language projects

From English to Cyrillic to Chinese

The increasing number of languages that companies need to translate into require careful planning when preparing translation projects. Thus, choosing appropriate tools, finding qualified project teams, and applying suitable concepts to avoid additional work become crucial tasks for the project manager. If all these issues are considered beforehand, a perfect balance can be achieved within the magic triangle of time, cost and quality.

By Peter Kreitmeier, itl AG

Due to globalization and the opening of markets today translation and localization projects often involve twenty or more languages. The notion that these projects can be handled just like the translation

of a Word-written handbook into English is widespread – but mistaken. So what are the differences between these two tasks?

- Translating a source document into a multitude of languages holds the risk of exploding costs if certain issues are not addressed during project preparation.

- These tasks demand considerable know-how regarding management and process workflow.
- East European and Asian languages cannot be processed with West European character sets. Often these languages demand additional considerations so that the translations correspond with the respective country's customs. Thus, applications that are not fully Unicode enabled (e.g. FrameMaker) require special process workarounds that need to be properly implemented, otherwise they can disrupt the entire translation project. To solve this specific issue itl AG has developed its One World Publishing concept, a useful process workaround description.

Due to the above-mentioned facts the early planning stage of multi-language translation projects is of great importance. To increase the odds for a successful completion of such a project, the following should be observed during the preparatory phase.

1. Project preparation

Ideally, process optimization with particular regard to the planned translation volume should already begin during editorial compilation. Corresponding elements include tools that support terminology, appropriate marking of information not to be translated, design of a process-compatible layout while taking into account that certain languages require more text space than others, and tools supporting structural document quality control ("preflight tools for translations"). In large-scale translation projects, such efforts will easily prove to be cost-effective even if the initial editing process is more costly and time-consuming.

The first step of the translation service provider is a 'data input check' or inspection of the structural quality of the source documents.

Experience shows that the structural quality of source documents often is not optimal for the translation process. This can be attributed to one or more of the following factors:

- Unresolved cross-references or other violations leading to error messages.
- Manual text breaks leading to an awkward appearance of the translated version.
- Text justification or line breaks via tabulators or blank spaces.

- Text in graphics that cannot be edited or expanded if the translation is longer than the source.
- Document layout that is CI-compatible in the source language, but has not been tested for all target languages, e.g. concerning fonts. Especially with non-Unicode applications such as FrameMaker, insufficient testing of the utilized fonts, regarding their suitability for all target languages may result in lengthy after-the-fact discussions. For example, only the brand-new FrameMaker patch from April 2006 solves a general font and presentation problem with the Polish, Slovakian and Serbian languages, and with certain diacritical characters in the Baltic languages, that previously called for rather adventuresome workarounds.
- With Asian languages, aspects other than font selection may become significant, e.g. when the software application requires a Shift JIS coding instead of the supposedly future-proof Unicode. This is when all the fun stops, even with well-established translation memory systems (TMS), which like to advertise with Unicode. Occasionally these problems have to be solved without much help from the respective tool's technical support personnel, who cannot always be relied on to have grasped all the necessary product details.

Unfortunately, human intuition frequently fails when such situations are evaluated. One example: many contemporary projects are of the single-source type, where one source of data forms the basis for several other products in different media, e.g. PDF files for printing, context-sensitive HTML help and other WWW applications. Let's assume the source project consists of five FrameMaker books. It only takes a simple calculation to realize that if such a project involves twenty languages, the amount of effort expended on the source language may have to be multiplied by a factor of 300 (five books x twenty languages x three media). This means, that five minutes of work on the source language may translate to more than three days of work to accomplish the same task for all target languages and media.

These large-scale projects can be made easier if scripts (for FrameMaker) or macros (for Word) are employed, that may be customized for the respective customer and may be adapted

continuously. A prerequisite for this is a full mastery of the corresponding tool. Moreover, only translation service providers with the necessary in-house technical support will manage to perform the small miracles an ongoing project may still require on a daily basis.

2. Employing the adequate tools

The use of translation memory tools for multi-lingual projects has become a matter of fact. For this reason, the issue is neither discussed any further here nor is any evaluation attempted as to which tool may be the most appropriate. Still,

TMS are not exempt from continuous development. Therefore, the planning of large translation projects should include detailed considerations of the different functionalities and which TMS covers them best. This may involve items like terminology extraction, filter quality for the DTP tool used, quality assurance features, handling of twenty and more languages at the same time or procedures for TM update, just to mention a few.

3. The project team

The number of team members required for such a project varies greatly. However, the following positions should always be filled: project manager(s), process manager(s) with expert TMS know-how, translators, layouter(s), proofreader(s), and possibly terminologist(s). The project manager must be able to coordinate all project members and maintain firm control over the magic triangle between project deadlines, cost, and product quality. Ideally the manager will be involved in all project phases, from preparation of the bid to project completion. He/she ought to have at least basic knowledge of the tools employed, and must be able to provide the customer with an interim report at any time. In particular with large projects, clients expect feedback on status and progress. Tools offering integrated project management functions can be helpful, but the opposite is possible as well: because such tools generally indicate project progress in percentage values, the merit

of such a statistic depends on the sophistication of the underlying algorithm. It has happened that these percentage values had little to do with reality.

An important criteria when selecting translators is a genuine competence regarding the language and subject matter as well as the translation memory tool. One secret of high-quality translations is the ability to 'anticipate terminology', even if no standard terminology has been established.

Apart from tool proficiency, layouters should have developed a sense for layout effects caused by various languages. Localization tools

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facilitate the solving of difficult layout problems with the help of translation simulations in which text expansion effects can be modelled. The classic DTP tools do not offer these functions.

TM specialists are indispensable if standard

filters have to be adapted for the project or if a TMS first has to be configured to customer needs, e.g. by protecting text that must not be translated or by guiding special objects such as conditional text or variables through the entire process.

Proofreaders do not have to be native speakers of the respective language but need to be briefed precisely on quality definitions.

4. Quality assurance

Given the large budgets required for major multi-language translation projects, timely agreement on quality and its management is essential. The customer surely expects maximum quality translation. But what does this mean? For example, how can terminology be kept consistent if the project does not include corresponding standards or if the project volume or duration lead to several translators being employed for a single language? And what about the notorious 100 percent matches: do they have to be proofread or not? This much can be said here: do not blindly trust the marketing claims for any tool. Because in TMS-based translation workflows the essential question is, how much 'garbage' does the existing translation memory contain already. This is one topic

where the translating community is suffering from serious misconceptions. Should quality assurance be done according to the four-eyes principle, because translations are always subject to interpretation? Does a formal workflow involving client reviewers have to be arranged? If so, who will ensure timely feedback? And will reviewers know the areas to which their responsibilities extend versus those aspects they better not evaluate? A minor but unpleasant side issue is the habit of performing corrections via notes in PDFs. Keep in mind that it is rather challenging to incorporate PDF notes, for example in the Polish language, into a FrameMaker document. Again, this requires special know-how.

Summary

The issues addressed above illustrate that language proficiency is an essential but not the only precondition for the success of multilingual projects. In our view experience with the relevant processes and detailed knowledge of the tools are far more important. Even before the start of the project close coordination and agreement between customer and service provider have to be achieved if the project should be completed successfully.

itl contact

itl has been active in the field of technical documentation since 1982 and has become a specialist in consulting and supporting all areas of technical documentation. The company is located in Munich, and has subsidiary offices in Stuttgart, Cottbus and Vienna.

contact:
Peter Kreitmeier
Head of translation Department
pkreitmeier@itl.de
www.itl.de

Network-compatible utility facilitates work of translation agencies

TransWatch – project management for translators



photo: Carl Dwyer

Recently, JABRO GmbH & Co. KG, a translation agency headquartered in Gütersloh, Germany, launched its software tool TransWatch. This application is designed to optimize and streamline administrative tasks and workflows of translation agencies. Made by users for users, this program is based on the long-standing experience of the professional translation agency, whose expertise was fully integrated in the concept and implementation.