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Ten good reasons for using a translation memory

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Definitions

analysis

process of comparing a source document to the content of a translation memory to determine the percentage of translated and untranslated text

editing, revising

process of verifying the accuracy of a translation by comparing the target text to the source text

By Uwe Muegge

Ten good reasons for using a translation memory

More than 20 years after the first commercial translation memory products became available, surveys indicate that while the vast majority of those surveyed do use a translation memory system, less than 30 percent of translators use this type of tool for every translation project or on a daily basis. Studies of translation memory usage among even the most technically advanced users show that the benefits of using a translation memory - beyond reusing existing translation - are still not well understood.

Below is a discussion of the major benefits that users of any commercial translation memory product can enjoy. In the opinion of the author, each of these benefits is compelling enough on its own to justify the use of a translation memory tool for all but the most exotic translation projects.

1. Systematic translation re-use

This feature gave this type of tool its name: the capacity to store source and target segment together, which enables a translation memory system to propose a translation if the same or a similar source segment should appear in a future translation project.

Unlike traditional translation environments, in which translators must actively search for previously translated sentences, translation memory systems automatically search their memories and present matches to the translator for re-use. In a translation memory environment, translators never translate the same or similar sentence twice.

Many commercial translation memory products not only support matching on the segment level but allow translators to search on the phrase/word level. Subsentential searches are useful for translators who work with texts that are non-repetitive on the sentence level but feature recurring phraseology, collocations, and idioms.

2. Automatic dictionary lookup

The two most relevant translation standards, ASTM F2575 and CEN EN 15038, describe the creation of project-specific, multilingual termbases as industry best practices. So the big question is: How do linguists access terminology data quickly and efficiently?

Linguists who maintain glossaries in Excel spreadsheets, Word tables, or PDF documents have to interrupt the translation process and perform an active search each time they come across an unknown term. In addition, the outcome of that search is uncertain, as the translator typically does not know whether the unknown term is actually included in the glossary or not.

A translation memory environment, on the other hand, automatically highlights the terms in a segment that are available in the terminology management component. With automatic dictionary lookup, translators simply select a target term and insert that term in the target segment, when they encounter a term in a segment. So having a comprehensive glossary in place enables translators to translate even the most terminologically challenging texts without interruption.

match

result of a search in a translation memory where a stored segment is either identical with (100% match) or similar to (fuzzy match) a segment to be translated

segmentation

process of dividing a source document into smaller parts, typically sentences

termbase

database that contains a collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

terminology

collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

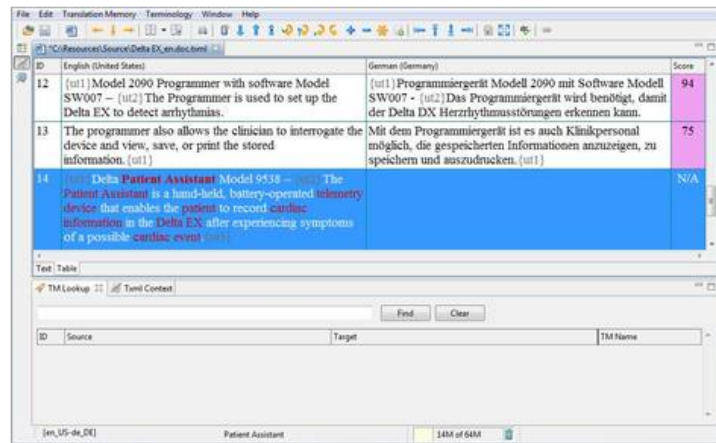
terminology management system

type of translation software that enables users to efficiently collect, process, and present terminology

translation memory system

type of translation software that supports the work of translation professionals in two ways:

- 1) making previous translations easily available for re-use;
- 2) automating many translation-related tasks



Example of a translation memory environment that illustrates text segmentation, filtering of formatting information, and automatic dictionary lookup (available terms highlighted in red).

3. Easy completeness check

One of the most basic requirements for a quality translation is that the translation is complete. Working in a traditional translation environment, there is no simple way to guarantee that the entire text has actually been translated. In a translation memory tool, on the other hand, an empty target segment stands out like a sore thumb, making it very hard for translators, editors, and revisers to overlook a missing translation.

4. Multiple file format support

All commercial translation memory tools support multiple file formats. In other words: Translators are able to translate source documents that were created in an application, which they don't know how to use nor have a license for. For instance, translators who use a translation memory system that includes a filter for Adobe InDesign can actually translate InDesign files without having Adobe InDesign installed on their computer.

This feature allows translators not only to work in one familiar interface while offering translation services for many file formats, but also to save possibly thousands of dollars in licensing costs and training fees.

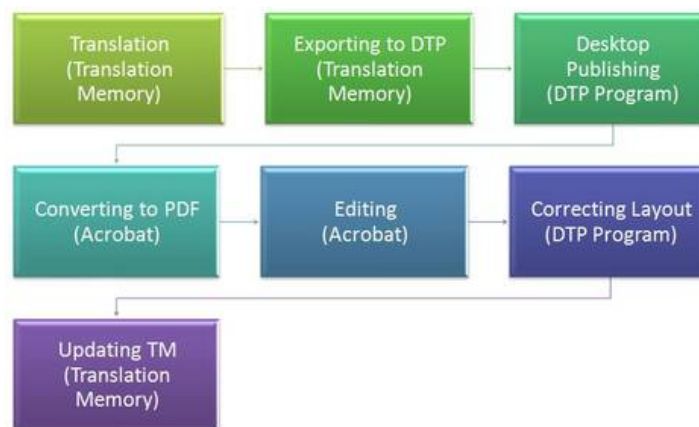
5. Simplified translation editing and revising

Both major translation quality standards, ASTM F2575 and CEN EN 15038, require that a person other than the translator edits/revises each translation. In a traditional translation environment, it is difficult to ensure that changes in one translation carry over to similar translations in the future. There is no simple and effective way of alerting translators to the fact that they should translate a given sentence in a certain way.

But even in environments where translation memories are used, there is evidence suggesting that more often than not editing/revising is performed outside of translation memory tools.

There are two major problems associated with this practice. Firstly, editing/revising a translated document in the target (e.g. Microsoft Word) or an intermediary format (e.g., Adobe PDF) typically requires manual, i.e. error-prone, copying and pasting to update the translation memory with any edits made. This copying and pasting between applications can be very time consuming, which leads to the second problem, namely that some linguists neglect to update their translation memories after they have delivered the target document. This in turn results in translation updates where editors/revisers repeatedly face the same errors that they had fixed in previous versions of the document.

If, however, linguists use a translation memory not only for translation but also for editing/revising, they can not only streamline the post-translation workflow by eliminating a number of non-value-added processes, they can also ensure that their translation memories are always up-to-date.



Representation of a traditional editing/revising process. Editing/revising in a translation memory tool can eliminate two to three non-value-added steps in this workflow.

6. More accurate estimating

In a business environment, it is important to make accurate forecasts about the time and budget needed to complete a given translation project. Working in a word processor environment, the only objective basis for any type of forecast is the total word count of the project.

In a competitive situation, where multiple vendors bid on the same project, translators who base their estimates solely on the total number of words have a distinct disadvantage: Many longer documents in the technical domain have a significant percentage of internal repetition, which the translation memory can identify, but the word processor cannot. Not to mention scenarios where translation buyers submit a translation memory together with the source document and expect a detailed quote that reflects the leverage obtained from the translation memory.

Even if there is no external pressure to provide the most competitive estimate possible, the analysis feature of a translation memory system enables translators to create more accurate project schedules. And better schedules allow translators to line up more projects without increasing their stress levels.

7. Streamlined collaborative leveraging

When many translators work on an incremental update of a document such as a user manual, using a translation memory is a no-brainer. But how about a project where only a few translators collaborate on a translation without any pre-existing translation memory?

Even in this scenario where many translators would argue that a traditional word processor is just as useful as a translation memory tool, this author strongly favors the translation memory.

Consider these facts: Whenever a translation project involves multiple translators, stylistic and terminological consistency is a major challenge. Having a language-specific translation style guide in place can alleviate some of the style issues. However exchanging, consolidating, and sharing translation memories among translators enables all translators participating in a project to access fuzzy matches created by the other project members. Collaborating by using these fuzzy matches then ensures a higher degree of stylistic consistency than would have been possible in an otherwise isolated word processor environment.

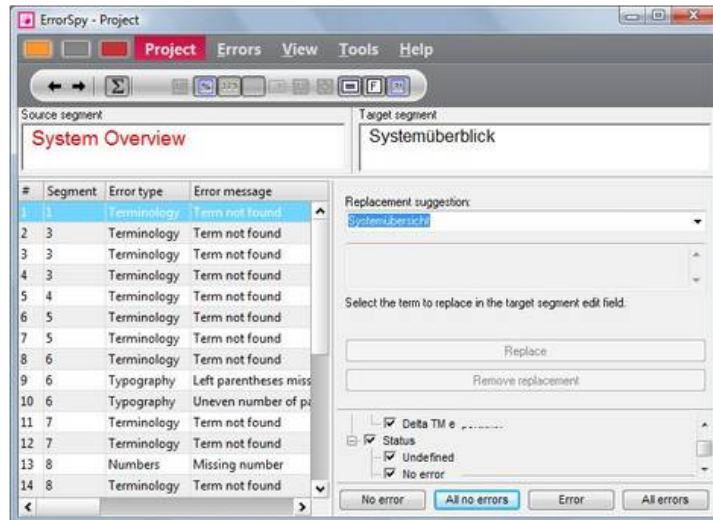
Another major advantage of using a translation memory in a team environment is the ability to share project terminology in a very efficient manner. Using the automatic dictionary lookup feature enables all translators involved in a project to use the same terms within and across documents. Sharing terminology in this way not only speeds up translation but also dramatically reduces the time otherwise required for harmonizing diverging terminology during the editing/revising phase.

8. Enhanced quality assurance

Translating in a translation memory system provides translators with a simple and very effective solution for ensuring the completeness of their translations, compliance with client- or project-specific glossaries, and stylistic conventions. A number of tools, e.g. Wordfast and Trados QA Checker among translation memories, and ErrorSpy and QA Distiller among dedicated translation quality assurance products, offer extensive error checking functionality.

All of these systems perform automatic comparative analyses, i.e. they check if a specific feature is present in the source segment and whether its equivalent is present in the target segment as well. These tools can be used to automatically identify terminology errors (deviations from the project glossary), translation inconsistencies (same source segment, different translations), number issues (values, formatting), etc.

Making automated error checking part of the quality assurance process enables linguists to improve the level of formal translation quality in large projects much faster than would be possible in a traditional translation environment that must by necessity rely on manual checking alone.



Linguists can use translation quality assurance tools such as ErrorSpy to generate automatic error reports in a batch mode or to fine-tune reports manually in an interactive mode.

9. Improved translation productivity

As indicated in this author's definition of a translation memory system, this type of tool automates many translation related task. Examples of tasks that can be automated in a translation memory tool include automatic translation memory search, automatic insertion of matches, automatic dictionary lookup, automatic completeness check, automatic tag validation, etc.

In addition, working in a translation memory tool has many ergonomic advantages, e.g. source and target sentence are visible in close proximity in one window, source and target segments are linked and move in synchronicity, filters hide distracting formatting so that translators can focus on the translation task, etc.

All of these benefits are available from the very first sentence a translator translates in a translation memory tool. So even in the most pessimistic scenario in which there is never a repetition or a similar source sentence, translators should be able to translate faster because translation memories are simply better suited to performing translations.

10. Better alignment with client needs

In a survey research firm Common Sense Advisory conducted among translation buyers, participants ranked perceived quality, technical capabilities, and price (in that order) after language capabilities, as the most important buying issues for translation services. In today's most typical translation scenarios, using a translation memory system will have a decidedly positive impact on a translator's performance in the areas of critical importance to potential clients.

Perceived quality: While translation memories cannot ensure that a translation conveys the correct meaning, translation memories can help translators ensure that their translations are complete (i.e. all sentences are translated), that the correct project terminology was used, that the translation is stylistically consistent, that the formatting is consistent, etc. Translators can use either the built-in QA features of their translation memory tools or dedicated automated QA tools to ensure and document formal translation quality. This ability is particularly helpful for winning clients that operate in an ISO 9000 or a similar environment.

Technical capabilities: Translators who use a translation memory product can process documents in many of today's most popular file formats without requiring prior text extraction, conversion, or complete DTP re-processing after translation. The capability of translators who use a translation memory tool to integrate seamlessly with their client's publishing processes gives those translators a major competitive edge.

Price: With translation becoming more and more a truly global business, competition among translators for the most attractive projects is already intense. This means that translators will have to find ways to increase their productivity just in order to survive. Understanding the true potential of translation memory tools and using these tools accordingly, which most translators currently don't, is a very promising strategy for translators to offer their services at compelling rates while maintaining, if not improving, their standard of living.

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