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Ten good reasons why you should validate your translated terminology

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Ten good reasons why you should validate your translated terminology

Recent survey results suggest that more and more practitioners in the field of technical communication understand the benefits of maintaining client- or project-specific termbases. However, based on anecdotal evidence, it seems as if very few organizations currently have processes for validating translated terminology, i.e., employing subject-matter experts to check the suitability of those translated terms on the client side. This article outlines some of the major benefits of terminology validation, the most noteworthy of which is shorter time-to-market as a result of a more streamlined translation process.

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By Uwe Muegge

Understanding that translated terms are as important as source-language terms

The names for the products/services an organization offers and the features/functions of those offerings typically make up the bulk of an organization's termbase. While these items are certainly linguistic assets, they are primarily thought of as core intellectual property, which is why the creation of these terms typically involves a team of experts from multiple domains such as product management, engineering, technical communication, marketing communication, legal, etc.

However, once a term is available in the source language and the need for translation arises, more often than not, the only expert involved in the translation of terminology is the translator. In today's business environment, most translators are freelancers, who typically work for multiple clients/agencies and by necessity have only a limited understanding of a specific product, its competitive situation, etc. This is especially true for new products.

After investing a lot of time and effort in developing terminology in the source language, when organizations completely outsource the terminology translation process, they are essentially leaving the development of target-language terminology to a (typically anonymous) translator, i.e. someone whose credentials and level of subject-matter expertise may not have been thoroughly assessed by the translation buyer.

This practice amounts to letting the key words that in many cases have a major influence on the marketability - and usability - of a product or service be determined by a person who is typically neither close to the client company, let alone the product.

Having translated terms validated by a subject-matter expert, e.g., an in-country technical or marketing manager (either internal or with a distributor), helps close this gap and ensure that translated terms are in fact suitable and appropriate for the target market.

Enabling translators to translate with confidence

Many translators are perfectionists: For them, good enough is simply not good enough! This type of translator will question the validity of glossary terms - regardless of whether or not those terms were provided by an agency or a fellow translator. Speaking from personal experience as a longtime professional translator, I can say that the terms I was most suspicious of, were the ones I researched/created myself, being fully aware of my limitations. The result: Inconsistent use of glossary terms due to the fact that the translator discovered 'better' terms in the process of translation, or an endless number of comments and annotations that explain why a glossary term is not the best choice in given context.

A glossary that bears the seal of approval by the client or a designated representative, on the other hand, should convince even the most discerning translator that there is no need for discussion or exploration and that the terms in such a validated glossary can be used safely.

Shortening or even eliminating in-country review

In-country review of translated documents is currently considered a best practice. The purpose of this quality assurance step is to make sure that a given translation meets the requirements of its target market. In a scenario where the translation service provider has implemented a comprehensive QA program (using ASTM F2575, SAE J2450, or another translation quality standard), incorrect or inconsistent use of terminology is one of the most common error types typically found by in-country reviewers. And it's not a particularly surprising occurrence, considering that the terminology used in the preparation of a translation has not been validated, and thus authorized, by the client.

If an in-country subject-matter expert validates terminology before translation, reviewers no longer need to check terminology (terminology verification can actually be performed by automated tools), which should dramatically reduce the time required for in-country review. Some organizations with mature translation (and terminology validation) processes find that for many document types in-country review is no longer necessary: The combination of long-term relationships between translation buyer and service provider, detailed instructions for translators, availability of language-specific style guides, and, of course, validated terminology, reliably produces translated documents that do not benefit from an additional QA step.

Avoiding expensive and time-consuming changes late in the process

It is common for in-country reviewers to insist on reviewing the translated text - and the terminology included in it - after all other work such as translation, editing, and DTP is complete, i.e., right before publication. The reason for wanting to view a translated document in its final form is, of course, that in-country reviewers wish to check completeness, text placement, formatting, in addition to the correct and consistent use of terminology.

In-country review is typically the stage where many, if not most terminology issues arise. However, requesting terminology changes (or any other text change for that matter) just prior to publication means that not only the translated text, but also the document in its native publishing format (e.g., InDesign, FrameMaker, Flash, etc.) will have to be adjusted. The fact that this type of change requires the involvement of DTP specialists has two serious consequences: 1) Terminology changes late in the process are typically much more expensive than textual changes that can typically be performed by translators. 2) Making changes late in the process requires more time because DTP specialists often are not familiar with the target language, and the changes they implement typically need to be re-reviewed by a translator.

Shortening time-to-market

Many commercial translation projects are tied to the launch of a product or service on the global marketplace. In fact, translation is in the critical

Definitions

Language Service Provider (LSP)
type of business that offers linguistic services such as translation, localization, interpretation

glossary
collection of words that have special meaning in a project

term
word that has a special meaning in a given subject field

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
effort to control the usage 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

validation
process of checking that an entry (or a part thereof) complies with certain established requirements

wiki
type of collaborative software program that typically allows web pages to be created and collaboratively edited

path of most of these launches, which means that a given product or service can only be introduced internationally once translation is complete. By the same token, any efficiencies gained by streamlining translation (for example, by reducing the time for in-country review) enable the organization to introduce the product or service more quickly.
The fact that a given product can generate revenue potentially weeks earlier just because a termbase had been validated before translation began should be a powerful motivator for implementing this additional step in the localization workflow.

Minimizing overall translation cost

Yes, adding validation to the terminology development process does cost money: You will have to identify and train an internal or external subject-matter expert (ideally the same person who reviews translations in a given market), develop and document standard operating procedures (SOPs), modify your terminology management technology infrastructure, and, of course, compensate the validators for their efforts.
A number of studies has shown that terminology work typically pays for itself within the first two years (see, for example, Böcker, Gust), and this fact holds particularly true if validation is part of the terminology development cycle. Making client-validated terminology available to the translation service provider before translation begins enables the LSP to reduce or eliminate in-country review and possibly other expensive QA steps, which would otherwise be necessary to ensure that the final translation product reflects the client's preferred terminology.

Reducing friction between LSP and translation buyer

Any time a reviewer on the client side identifies terminology errors in a translation, the translation service provider's qualification, processes, and due diligence are called into question. This is particularly true if the LSP is employing a quality metric like SAE J2450 that rates terminology errors as the worst type of error a translator can make.
In my experience, many so-called terminology errors identified by the client are simply instances of that client not communicating terminological preferences to the service provider at the beginning of a project. Is it an error to call a 'Flash drive' a 'USB stick'? It is certainly a problem if the client's reviewer expects to see 'Flash drive' and the translation provider delivers 'USB stick'.
In these situations, heated e-mails and phone calls between the two parties are as predictable as they are unnecessary. Taking the extra step of not only managing terminology on the service provider's side but of having those terms validated by the client before translation is a highly effective strategy for avoiding those endless and fruitless discussions about perceived terminology errors.

Automating the validation process

One of the major issues with terminology validation – as with any kind of client review - is the fact that it's an external process (from the service provider's point of view), and as such is typically difficult to manage. Even if the LSP is using a translation management system, more often than not, routing glossaries for validation require manual intervention by the project manager.
However, a dedicated, server-based terminology management system may offer features for automatic notification of assigned terminology validators, progress tracking, and automatic creation of an audit trail.
One of the software tools that enables enterprises to automate large parts of the terminology validation process is TermWiki, a web-based tool for collaborative terminology management developed by CSOFT.

Giving structure to a process that occurs anyway

If (in-country) client review is part of your translation workflow, you already have a terminology validation process in place. But correcting terminology problems late in the translation cycle is inefficient and expensive. Besides, chances are that at the final review stage, when many people operate in panic mode (OMG, we are already late and over budget!), chances are that the terminology changes the reviewer requires are implemented in the document under review but not updated in the glossary. The smart way of validating terminology is moving that part from

the end to the beginning of the translation cycle and making sure that all terminology changes are captured and reflected in the corporate termbase. Giving translators a client-approved, up-to-date, project-specific termbase ensures that translators use the right term the first time.

Ensuring client satisfaction

My definition of terminology, which differs markedly from relevant ISO standards such as ISO 704 and ISO 1087, is this: terminology is the set of terms that the client cares about a lot. Following that definition, using the 'wrong' terms in a translation is a major quality issue. To make sure that the client sees their preferred terms in a translation, it is not enough to just manage terminology on the LSP side. Without terminology validation early in the translation cycle, translators (and editors!) on the client side may be using the 'wrong' terms consistently all the way until in-country review, at which point terminology changes come with a hefty price tag.
Instead of correcting quality into a translated document late in the translation/product launch process, translation buyers and vendors should agree on proactively validating terminology before translation if at all possible.

With validated glossaries in place, translators will use the 'right' terms (the ones preferred by the client) the first time, ensuring client satisfaction without the need for an emotionally charged, time-consuming, and expensive correction process.

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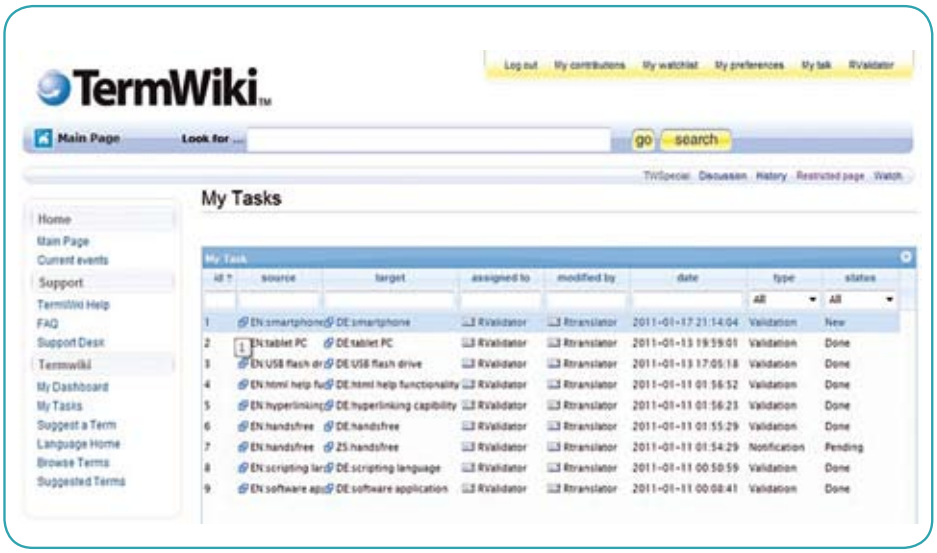

TermWiki Professional, an example of a terminology management system that automatically generates notifications for terminology validators.

contact

Uwe Muegge is the Director of MedL10N, the life science division of CSOFT. He is a member of TC37, the committee responsible for terminology standards at ISO, and F43, the committee responsible for translation standards at the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). He also teaches Terminology Management at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, CA.

uwe.muegge@medl10n.com
www.medl10n.com