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Why you should care about terminology management - even if you never translate a single term

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Uwe Muegge presenting on terminology at the Übersetznachlässe conference, organized by Deutsches Literaturarchiv.

Why You Should Care about Terminology Management—Even if You Never Translate a Single Term

Managing terminology can improve your translation speed, your earnings, and, ultimately, make you a happier translator!

The following is a revised and expanded version of the presentation on terminology management I gave at the Übersetznachlässe conference, organized by Deutsches Literaturarchiv, on November 26, 2019, in Marbach, Germany.

Those who keep advocating for terminology management as a translation best practice typically tell you that managing terminology means higher translation quality, improved consistency, and, ultimately, happier clients. These are all perfectly good reasons for translation

professionals to take terminology management seriously, but I'm going to give you an even better reason for systematic terminology management. I'm telling you that managing terminology can improve your translation speed, your earnings, and, ultimately, make you a happier translator! These benefits apply not only to those who translate technical, scientific, legal, and other types of terminology-rich material, but any translation professional, including literary translators and others who might never translate a single technical term!

When my favorite topic comes up in conversation with translation professionals, I consistently hear people say three things:

1. I know I should be managing terminology.
2. But I don't really understand why.
3. And even if I understood why, I wouldn't know how.

Almost any translation professional constantly deals with words that they either have to look up or should be translating in a uniform way for consistency.

In the following, I'll address the two latter comments, because that's actually easier to do than some experts have you believe. (Of course, the first comment needs no addressing, since if you think you should be managing terminology, I couldn't agree more!)

Because this is a discussion of terminology management fundamentals, let's begin with the most basic concept.

WHAT IS A TERM?

In my experience, if you ask two terminologists to define a term, any term, you're guaranteed to get three different answers, at a minimum. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that there are many definitions for "term," ranging from the esoteric (e.g., "a designation that represents a general concept by linguistic means"¹) to the mundane (e.g., "a word that matters to the client of a translation professional," which is the definition I give to those in my introduction to terminology management course). But ultimately, in this terminologist's view, the question of what is and isn't a term is ultimately an academic concern.

WHAT KIND OF WORDS SHOULD TRANSLATION PROFESSIONALS MANAGE?

Now this is a question that's actually relevant to the practice of translation.

My personal view is that not only the special words that belong to a specific discipline should be managed as part of every translation project, but every “difficult” word. And by “difficult,” I mean any word, or string of words that:

- You don’t know the translation of and would have to look up in a dictionary or other resource. Example: technical terms, idioms, jargon, archaic words, and any other words with which you may be unfamiliar.
- You know and that might be translated more than one way. For example, if you’re translating a computer catalogue, it would probably be a good idea to use the term “USB stick” consistently throughout the catalogue instead of using “USB stick” on one page, “flash drive” on another, and “thumb drive” on yet another, even though they all mean the same thing.

While it’s mostly the translation professionals working in domains such as technical, scientific, and legal translation who deal with “terminology,” It’s probably safe to assume that almost any translation professional constantly deals with words that they either have to look up or should be translating in a uniform way for consistency.

In my experience, if you ask two terminologists to define a term, any term, you’re guaranteed to get three different answers, at a minimum.

WHAT ARE TRANSITION TIMES?

Transition times are the periods when translation professionals switch from translation mode to terminology research mode (i.e., when they’re neither translating nor researching terminology). For example, when working with online dictionaries, transition time is the time required for moving the cursor from the translation environment (e.g., a word processor or translation memory system)



Figure 1: Translating with ad hoc terminology management means multiple (unproductive) transition times.

to the dictionary resource (e.g., a website or standalone dictionary application). Transition times can vary from a few seconds to minutes (e.g., when working with multiple paper dictionaries).

WHAT IS AD HOC TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT?

When someone solves a problem in an ad hoc fashion, they’re doing so in an unsystematic, on-the-fly manner. Translation professionals who use ad hoc terminology management resolve terminology issues one by one as they encounter them during translation.

What does translating with ad hoc terminology management look like? When you translate without a comprehensive, project-specific, multilingual term base, you must manage terminology ad hoc, meaning during translation. Doing terminology management during translation always means you have to interrupt the translation process to manage terminology! The result is an increase in transition times, leading to decreased productivity. This rule is particularly true if the following conditions apply:

- The source document contains many difficult words.
- Many of the difficult words are unknown words.
- You want to translate all the difficult words correctly.
- You want to translate all the difficult words consistently.

A typical translation process using ad hoc terminology management looks like this:

- Translate until you come across a difficult word in the source document.
- Stop translating.
- Transition from the translation environment to the terminology management environment (e.g., consulting one or a combination of print and online dictionaries, online term bases, parallel texts, etc.).
- Search for the target-language word in the terminology management environment.
- Transition from the terminology management environment back to the translation environment.
- Manually insert the target-language word into the target-language content.
- Translate until there’s another difficult word in the source document.
- Stop translating, and so on and so forth. (See Figure 1 above.)

WHAT IS PROACTIVE TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT?

Being proactive means taking control and preparing a solution for a problem in advance. Likewise, in proactive terminology management, translation professionals systematically extract and research the difficult words involved in a translation project. Most importantly, terminology extraction and research happen before translation begins.

What does translating with proactive terminology management look like?

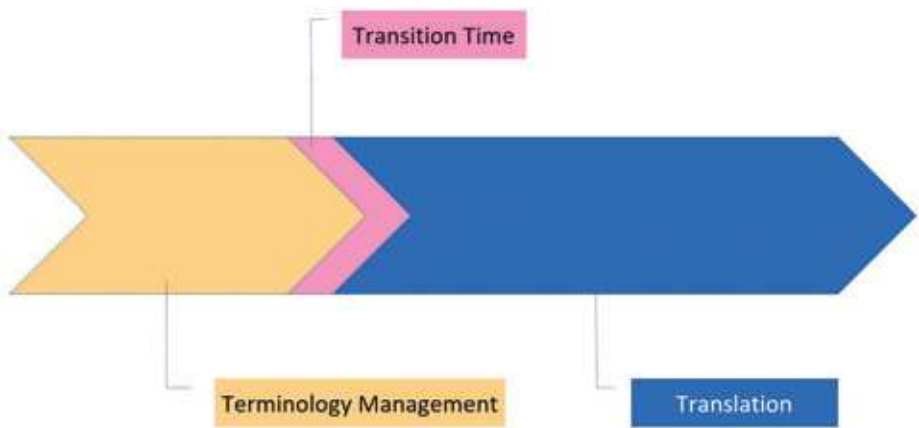


Figure 2: Translating with proactive terminology management can reduce the number of transitions times to one.

Having a comprehensive, project-specific, multilingual term base available at the beginning of a translation project made a dramatic difference in my personal practice when I was still working as a translation professional. In all likelihood, being proactive when it comes to terminology management would also work for you. Why?

- You don't have to research difficult words during translation, which means;
- You can translate without interruptions, which means;

- You can translate faster because there are no transition times involving going back and forth between your translation environment and the terminology management environment.

It's also worth noting that, at least in my personal experience, transitioning from terminology management to translation only once not only improves translation speed but also quality. Eliminating interruptions for terminology management also eliminates the risk of losing your train of thought when managing terminology during translation. (See Figure 2 above for an illustration.)

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO IMPLEMENT PROACTIVE TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT?

For many quality-conscious translation professionals, the answer to this question is: surprisingly little! To implement a simple proactive terminology management practice, you only have to do two things. First, you need to read the source text in its entirety before translation (which many of you already do). Second, while reading the source text, extract, research, and record the difficult words, phrases, and their translations before you begin the actual document translation process.

Even translation professionals who are most comfortable working with a word processor can start managing terminology proactively—tomorrow, if they so choose. As you can see in Figure 3 to the left, a standard word processor can easily display a term base window in addition to windows for the source and target text, respectively.

HOW IS A TRANSLATION MEMORY SYSTEM A SUPERIOR TRANSLATION ENVIRONMENT, EVEN FOR NON-REPETITIVE TEXT?

Many translation professionals I know who work on non-technical/scientific/

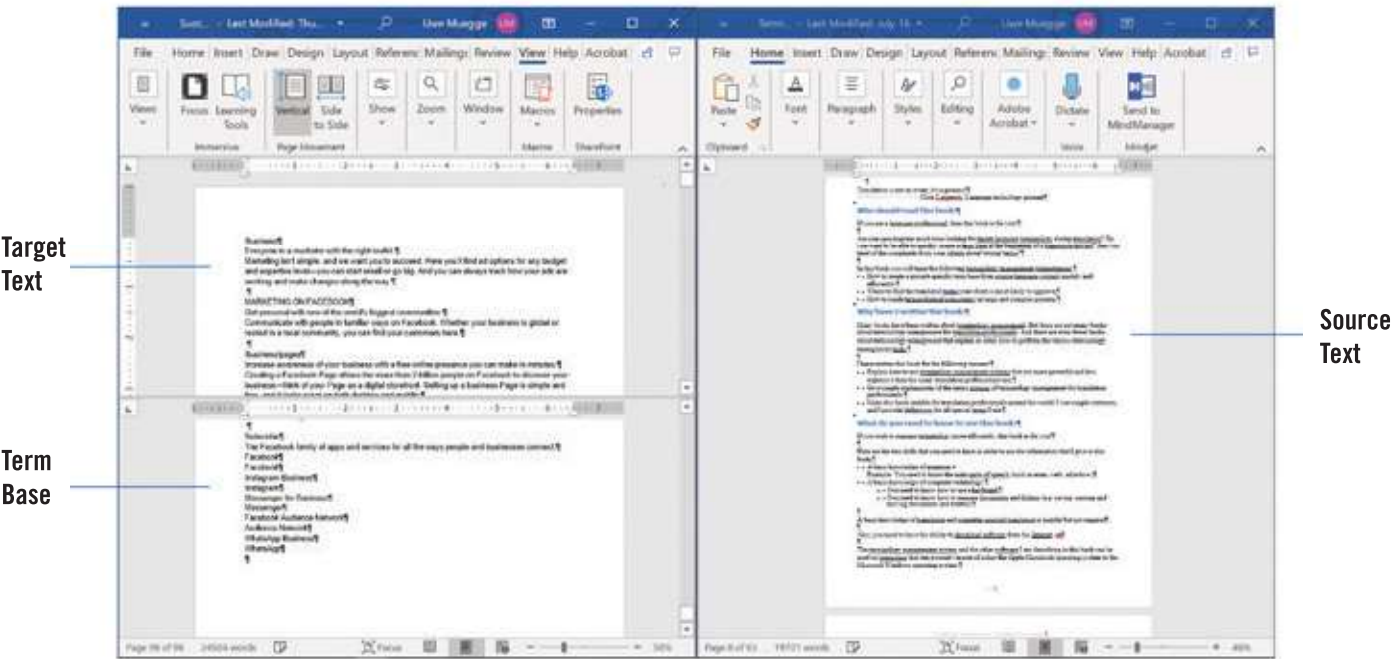


Figure 3: Term base window when translating in a word processor

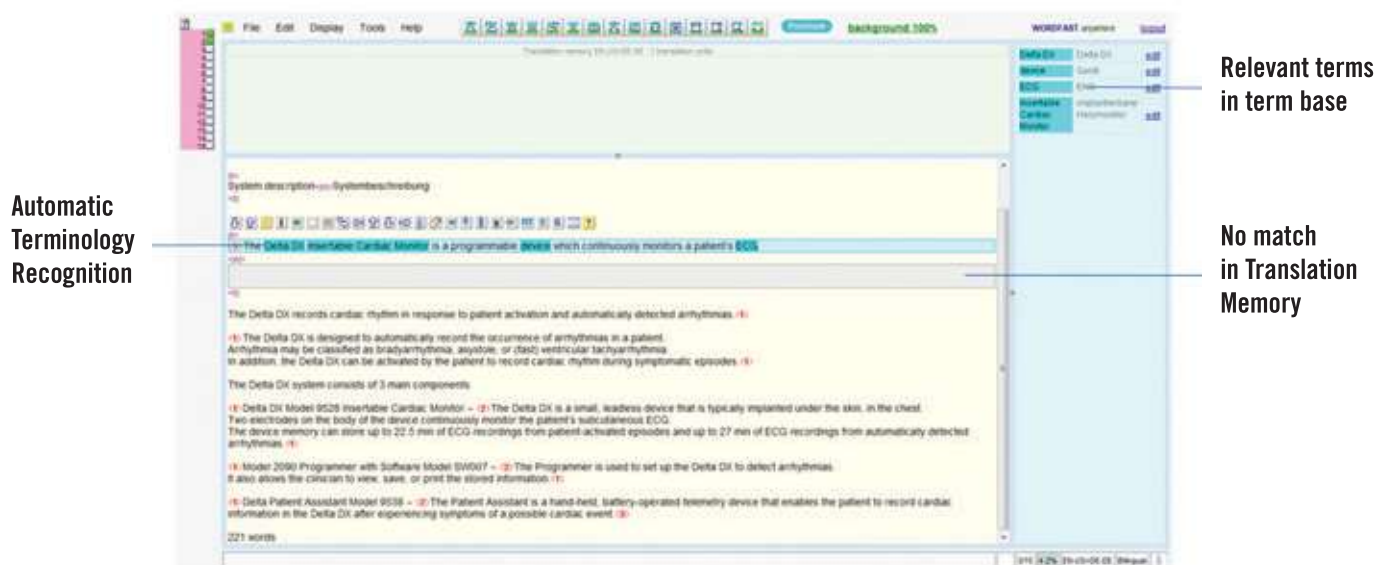


Figure 4: Automatic terminology recognition in a translation memory system

legal/financial translations would never consider exchanging their word processor for a translation memory system as their primary translation environment. The main reason for this attitude seems to be the persisting myth that using a translation memory system makes sense only when translating repetitive text. And many translation professionals who currently use a word processor for translation deal with non-repetitive text.

I've been telling anyone who is willing to listen that while translation memory systems are most useful for the translation of repetitive text, they also make a world of a difference for the translation of non-repetitive text. One of the main reasons that translation memory systems are so useful is that once words and phrases are stored in the terminology management component of a translation memory system, these words and phrases are automatically recognized in the source text. Automatic terminology recognition means that all difficult words are highlighted in the source sentence, and the translated (difficult) words stored in the term base can be inserted into the target sentence at the push of a button.

It deserves emphasizing that automatic terminology recognition works with a completely empty translation memory database, as Figure 4 above illustrates. Plus this feature is available in every translation memory system with which

I'm familiar, including the many free translation memory products and web-based services available today.

While translation memory systems are most useful for the translation of repetitive text, they also make a world of a difference for the translation of non-repetitive text.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN FOR YOU?

If terminology management before translation is currently not part of your translation routine, you now have one more very compelling reason to change your ways. In addition to being able to produce more consistent (meaning better) translations, proactive terminology management could also make you a faster translator (no more pesky interruptions to look up words during translation). And it cannot be emphasized enough that managing terminology proactively doesn't really add time/effort to a project, since you have to look up the difficult words in a project anyway.

If you still use a word processor for translation, with proactive terminology

management, switching to a translation memory system will take your translation practice to a whole new level of speed and efficiency, even if your source texts are not repetitive (yes, I'm talking to you, literary translators). Proactive terminology management in a translation memory system is a good idea for all translation professionals who look up words, be they proper terms or just difficult words, as part of their translation projects.

And finally, remember that proactive terminology management not only means higher translation speed, improved earnings, and, ultimately, a happier you, but the results also make for happier clients. ●

NOTE

- ¹ ISO 1987:2019 Terminology work and terminology science—Vocabulary, <http://bit.ly/ISO-term>.



Uwe Muegge is Head of Terminology, Global Business Marketing at Facebook. He has more than 20 years of experience in translation and localization, having worked in leadership functions on both the vendor and buyer sides of the industry. He has published many articles on translation tools and processes and taught computer-assisted translation and terminology management courses at the college level in both the U.S. and Europe. Contact: info@muegge.cc.