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Disciplining words: What you always wanted to know about terminology management

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SELECTEDWORKS™

What you always wanted to know about terminology management

Disciplining words

Terminology management is a hot topic these days. At the tcworld conference 2006, terminology had its own forum with hundreds of participants. And a number of highly visible institutions like the Terminology SIG of the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA) has been evangelizing the development and use of standardized terminology in the business world for many years. Yet a recent terminology survey[1] reveals that even in the localization field, where the benefits of terminology work are most palpable, a high percentage of businesses does not systematically manage terminology. Why? Because there is still a lot of confusion surrounding the whys, whats, whens, and hows of terminology management. Here are some initial answers that apply to almost any organization that cares about quality, customer satisfaction, and, ultimately, the bottom line.

Photo: Brenton Nicholls

By Uwe Muegge

Why should my organization manage terminology?

Your organization can profit from terminology management in several ways:

- Terminology management reduces time-to-market by streamlining development, writing, editing, review and translation cycles. With approved terminology in place, developers, writers, editors, reviewers and translators can use automated tools to insert and verify terminology.
- Terminology management is an excellent strategy for sharing knowledge. A well-designed term base that is continuously updated provides valuable information to all communicators inside the organization (e.g. authors of technical, marketing and legal texts, including software engineers) and outside the organization (e.g. advertising, marketing and translation agencies). In fact, such a term base is useful for almost any employee, especially for those who need to familiarize themselves with an unfamiliar domain, e.g. new hires/transfers.
- Terminology management enables organizations of any size to use the same terms consistently within and across the communication types that accompany a product or service. Typical communication types include specifications, drawings, GUI, software strings, help systems, technical documentation, marketing materials, regulatory submissions, etc. As multiple authors typically contribute to these communications, terminology management is the most efficient solution for ensuring that the organization speaks with one voice.

When is the best time in the product life cycle to start a terminology management project?

The best time to start terminology management for a project is the specification phase, i.e. the time before the actual development effort for the product or service begins. Controlling project terminology at this early stage is the most efficient method for ensuring that all communicators, including developers, use the same terms for the same features and functions throughout the life cycle of a product or service. Starting later, e.g. during the documentation or even in the translation phase, prevents effective source control. For example, once software development has reached a certain point, correcting inconsistencies carries such a heavy cost and time penalty that such changes are prohibitive. And if the software is inconsistent, the documentation, as well as the translated versions of the software and the documentation, will be as well.

What type of tools does my organization need to manage terminology?

A customizable terminology database system forms the core of any terminology management effort. Organizations that do not develop terminology at an early project stage might benefit from an automatic terminology extraction tool to help build the terminology database. The content of such a terminology database needs to be easily accessible to all communicators, e.g. developers, authors, reviewers, translators. Today, that typically means exchanging terminology data between multiple systems such as software development systems, authoring/content management systems, terminology/controlled language checkers, translation/machine translation/globalization management systems and CRM/ERP/inventory management systems. As the importance of consistent use of terminology is better understood, more and more tools vendors provide direct interfaces between terminology databases and the environments, in which terminology is being used. A potentially easier-to-implement but less efficient solution involves the deployment of a terminology website that gives all communicators online access to terminology. Note, however, that many web-based terminology management systems require manual look-up on the user side and have only limited capabilities, if any, for checking documents for consistent use of terminology.

What is the concept-based approach to terminology management?

A typical dictionary lists entries in alphabetical order, and each entry consists of one term per language. In this term-based approach, synonyms (e.g. display and monitor), variants (e.g. peripheral device and periphery device), and different forms (e.g. Department of Defense, Dept.of Defense, DoD) are each listed in separate entries. In a concept-based approach, all terms that express the same concept (i.e. unit of knowledge, idea) are listed in the same entry. It's the concept-based approach to terminology management that enables organizations to actually manage the usage of terminology by identifying desirable and undesirable terminology and marking terms accordingly, e.g. as either 'preferred', 'admitted' or 'deprecated'/'do not use'.

How much information should go into a terminological entry?

ISO 12620 specifies almost 200 possible data categories for a terminological entry, and yet ISO 12616 lists only three of those as mandatory, i.e. term, source, and date. For many organizations, the most practical solution will probably be a data model that involves less than two dozen data categories. The Terminology SIG of LISA has just released a proposal for TBX-Lite (see the sections on standards below) that lists 21 data categories, many of which will be automatically populated by a terminology management system. The data categories specified in TBX-Lite are ideally suited for organizations that wish to build a powerful, standards-compliant, yet easily manageable terminology database.

Figure 1: Sample entry in a multilingual terminology database

What is the most important type of term that is missing from many terminology databases?

Trademarks! Trademarks and trade names are core intellectual property in any organization and must be used correctly in all external communications. A terminology database is the tool of choice for enabling consistent usage of those key communication assets. In addition, maintaining trademarks in a terminology database is an excellent safeguard against accidental translation, an error that can cause major financial damage, not to mention embarrassment. By the way: The correct part of speech of a trademark is proper adjective, i.e. the trademark modifies a generic noun as in 'KLEENEX® tissue paper'.

Why are definitions so important?

Writing definitions can easily be the most time-consuming and expensive part of managing terminology. On the other hand, the definition is often the most valuable part of a terminological entry, especially if the organization uses the terminology database as the universal knowledge base that it is. It's the definition that helps developers pick the correct term from a range of options, and it's the definition that lets a new employee understand an unfamiliar concept better than any other information in an entry. A quick note for those who struggle with definition writing: Remember that a terminological definition is not the same as a lexicographical entry. A good terminological definition is a brief, to-the-point statement that should not be longer than one sentence.

What standards provide guidance on terminology management?

- ISO 704:2000 Terminology work – Principles and methods
  This 38-page document is an excellent introductory text to terminology management.
- ISO 1087-1:2000 Terminology work – Vocabulary – Part 1: Theory and application
  This is another overview text that describes the major concepts used in terminology management.
- ISO 12616:2002 Translation-oriented terminography
  This document provides information on managing terminology specifically for translation environments.
- ISO 12620:1999 Computer applications in terminology – Data categories
  This document specifies the data categories that form the basis for the TBX and TBX-lite terminology exchange standards.
- LISA proposal for TBX-Lite, available online at www.lisa.org/sigs/terminology/
  This document lists 21 data categories for building powerful, standards-compliant term bases.

For a more comprehensive overview of terminology-related standards visit www.muegge.cc

[1] LISA Terminology Management Survey (www.lisa.org/sigs/terminology)

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