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Terminology talks with the pros: Uwe Muegge, terminologist

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Terminology Talks with the Pros: Uwe Muegge, Terminologist

It would be hard to describe in a few lines the vast experience that Uwe Muegge has in terminology, translation, localization, and education. He currently is the VP of Strategic Technology Solutions at OmniLingua Worldwide, a language service provider, but his credentials include filing a patent for an automatic terminology extraction process the year after he graduated from college, being a corporate terminologist for a Fortune 500 company, serving as translation and terminology consultant for the European Commission and the Inter-American Development Bank, as well as providing instruction in translation and terminology to graduate students in Europe and the United States.

1. First of all, thank you, Mr. Muegge, for giving me this opportunity to interview you. It is truly an honor to interview such an experienced terminologist. I started gathering and sharing information on terminology through my blog and the more I learn the more I realize that, just like the translation profession in its early years, being a terminologist is not a profession that is widely respected or understood by many. But personally, I think the prospects for the terminologist profession are great. Would you agree?

Thank you very much for having me. And yes, I share your optimism! I can tell you from personal experience that terminology management skills were critical to the success of many of the most demanding — and rewarding — projects I have recently been involved with.

As you know, just a few months ago, I took on the position of Vice President of Strategic Technology Solutions at language service provider OmniLingua Worldwide. And my very first project in this new position was to find an answer to the following question: What is the best way to support the translation of a large user manual into a new language combination for a client in the life science business? In other words: How do you make sure that linguists deliver the highest quality of translation in the fastest time possible? My solution: By providing these linguists with a comprehensive, project-specific, client-validated multilingual termbase — at the very beginning of the project.

In another project, this time for a client in the automotive industry, several hundred thousand words needed to be translated into multiple languages within 30 days. And there were no translation memories or any other type of reference material available — plus the source language was an unusual one for this type of project. Again, my solution was to develop comprehensive, project-specific, multilingual termbases, both for
customizing the machine translation engine (MT was the solution of choice for this high-volume, short-turnaround project) and supporting human post-editing.

These are just two examples of translation projects where having specific terminology management skills made a big difference in real-world business scenarios. And the same is true on the authoring side: One of the largest projects I ever participated in as a consultant involved setting up a corporate terminology management program for a Fortune 500 company – and that project included the creation of a dedicated terminologist position within the Technical Communication Group of that organization. So yes, while terminologists will continue to be in a niche profession in the foreseeable future, I see a growing need for linguists, be they writers or translators, who have this particular skill set.

2. I live in Washington DC, which is home to many international organizations where terminology management is a central issue. Throughout your articles you underline the importance of teaching translators to manage terminology better. Why doesn’t there seem to be a more active interest in U.S. universities in teaching translation-oriented terminology?

That’s an excellent question – one which I have asked myself many times. Of course, terminology management is a fairly young discipline, which is probably one reason why many universities engaged in translator training still neglect teaching terminology. And even at institutions that offer courses in terminology, students may learn the necessary skills in one course but if they don’t do systematic terminology work in their translation courses, these students may not fully develop their skills in this area. In my courses in computer-assisted translation, for each and every translation assignment, students create a comprehensive, project-specific termbase before they start translating.

But not all translator training programs embrace this systematic, process-driven approach to translation. In fact, I have a feeling that many translation instructors, regardless of what program descriptions or curricula say, teach translation in the literary tradition, where each project is separate from any other, and the text to be translated is a stand-alone text that is being translated by an individual linguist. And the goal of a translation in the literary tradition is to produce a brilliant translation. However, in the real world of commercial translation, be it product-centric or institutional translation, more often than not, translation projects are connected, i.e. they are updates, revisions, or variants of other projects, and especially in product-centric translation, any given text is tightly connected to other texts in product launch (e.g. user manual, installation manual, marketing collateral, etc.). Also, in commercial translation, translators, knowingly or not, work in teams because of the special skills required for the translation of very different types of texts and file formats (e.g. online help files, desktop publishing files, video tutorials, etc.). In the world of commercial translation, where correct meaning is expected
as a given, clients are primarily looking for consistency within and across documents. Buyers want all of their various documents to read like they were translated by a single person. And in a large project, that is only possible with proper terminology management.

Unfortunately, it is not only translation courses that are being taught by instructors who don’t understand product-centric translation well, it is curricula that are being designed by linguists who may have a background in language or literature, but not in commercial translation. And that’s why, in my opinion, we have too many translator training programs that provide too little instruction in terminology management.

3. And what about a certification like TermNet’s Certified Terminology Manager program by ECQA in Europe? There are probably many people in the U.S. who do not have the time or resources to enroll in a university program, but they could learn the basics on terminology project management and how to manage terminology properly, learn the tools of the trade, so to speak.

You are absolutely right: Traditional MA programs are not the right solution for every aspiring linguist; especially for working adults with families. Fortunately, there are many alternative training programs available, including several certificate options.

If I were in the market for translator training today, looking for an affordable, short-term program with a strong terminology component, I would give the following programs a good look:

Bellevue College, Continuing Education, Certificate in Translation & Interpretation, Bellevue, WA (onsite courses)

University of Denver, College of Professional and Continuing Studies, Certificate in Translation Studies, Denver, CO (online)

And for specific training in terminology management, especially for those with an interest in terminology management in a large organization, there is the TermNet, International Terminology Summer School, Cologne or Vienna (onsite courses) which offers exams for the ECQA Certified Terminology Manager.

4. I have been reading a bit about your publications Controlled Language Optimized for Uniform Translation (CLOUT). After reading some of your publications on the subject I believe the idea is to teach technical writers to write their documents in a more controlled and uniformed way to reduce variability so that when they go through to the translation process not only its translation but its terminology management runs more smoothly. Can you explain this a bit more and how it relates to improved terminology management?
The idea of a controlled language was first developed by Charles Ogden in the late 1920s. Ogden’s ‘Basic English’, a version of English that consists of a simplified grammar and a vocabulary of only 850 words, was designed to enable speakers of other languages to learn English in five weeks.

The most widely-used controlled language today is ‘Simplified Technical English’, which was developed by a consortium of aircraft and defense companies, and consists of about 60 writing rules and 875 general words. The goal of Simplified English is to enable writers of English to create documents that can be understood by readers with a limited command of the English language, thereby eliminating the need for these documents to be translated.

The idea behind the development of CLOUT was to create a style guide that would enable writers to write text that would be easy to translate, both by human translators and inexpensive rule-based machine translation systems. Above all, I wanted the rules for this new controlled language to be simple enough for a non-linguist to learn and follow.

For simplicity’s sake, and to make CLOUT as universal as possible, there is no vocabulary component to this controlled language. However, there are rules concerning vocabulary, e.g. rules regarding pronouns (should be avoided as pronouns can be difficult/impossible to translate) and articles (should be used before nouns to help clearly identify nouns as such).

5. I would also like to ask about soft skills as they relate to terminology management. In your opinion, how important are project management and social skills when dealing with stakeholders and clients?

I am glad you ask! Contrary to what seems to be a widely-held belief among some linguists, having good business skills is at least as important in the real world as having good linguistic skills. And that is especially true in large organizations where everything is deadline driven and everyone is always busy.

Project management is an essential part of the must-have skill set of terminologists who aspire to work for a global corporation or an international governmental or non-governmental organization. In these environments, terminologists typically manage multiple projects at the same time, moving collections of terms through a multi-stage process: from proposal to review to approval and on to translation and in-country review, and, if all goes well, to publication in multiple formats and media. And then there are constant change requests for existing terms. Even with the support of terminology and translation management systems, it is challenging to keep track of dozens of terms that are being developed or changed on any given day.
But for the most difficult part of the terminologist’s job, to the best of my knowledge, there is no software support available at all: Making sure that by day X there’s consensus among all the stakeholders that have a say in the development and translation of a term. It is not so much the term itself over which the fiercest battles are fought (after all, you can always give the marketing group and the engineers their own, separate terms if they can’t agree on a single one) it’s the definition, of which there can only be one for each term, that is often the object of prolonged and bitter disputes. And it’s the terminologist’s job to resolve these conflicts in a timely manner and in such a way that the parties are willing to collaborate on future terminology projects.

So in addition to good organizational skills, terminologists must have good negotiation and mediation skills to be successful in a corporate or institutional environment.

6. Thank you very much for sharing your insights with me! Do you have any final remarks for my readers?

Yes, I would like to take this opportunity to invite anyone who is interested in translation-oriented terminology management or translation tools and processes to visit my bibliography page that contains close to 100 articles and presentations. Also, I am very active on social media, in particular Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, where I publish about translation-related events and job opportunities. Please feel free to friend, follow and connect with me!