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Terminology management: Why you should care and how to get started

Uwe Muegge

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Uwe Muegge, CSOFT International Ltd.

Terminology management can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization's communication efforts across multiple channels

WHAT ARE THE INCENTIVES FOR MANAGING TERMINOLOGY?

More Efficient Communication

With a terminology management strategy in place, organizations of any size are able to use the same terms consistently within and across the various documents and labeling that accompany a product or service. As these documents are typically created in a collaborative environment, terminology management is the most efficient solution for making sure that the organization as a whole uses the same terms to describe the same features and functions.

With comprehensive, project-specific termbases available at the beginning of a project, team members are free from the tedious task of researching terms on their own. The availability of a project termbase also reduces the danger of multiple coworkers accidentally coining multiple terms for the same feature, which, if undetected, has the potential to confuse the user or cause unnecessary expense and delays for terminology harmonization later on in the product lifecycle.

WHAT IS AT STAKE IF AN ORGANIZATION DOESN'T MANAGE TERMINOLOGY?

A Product Launch Might be Adversely Affected

There is no question about it: Any terminology management effort is going to cost money. On the other hand, not managing your organization's terminology assets can cost you even more. Consider these facts: After deploying an organization-specific termbase, an organization has the means to help all internal and external communicators use the same terms when discussing the key features of the products and services the organization provides. In fact, with a termbase in place, communicators and

their editors can use automated tools to ensure compliance with the approved terminology rules. In the absence of an organization-wide termbase, it is very difficult to enforce terminological consistency within individual documents and across documents, let alone multiple document domains such as technical, marketing, and legal documents. If branding matters, using a comprehensive and up-to-date termbase to get terminology right during authoring helps organizations launch their

Definitions

glossary
collection of words that have special meaning in a project

synonym
word that has the same meaning as another word

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

Uwe Muegge
CSOFT International Ltd.
uwe.muegge@csoftintl.com

Uwe Muegge is the Director of MedL10N, the life science division of CSOFT. Uwe has more than 15 years experience in the translation and localization field. Before joining CSOFT, he served as the Corporate Terminologist at Medtronic, the world's largest manufacturer of medical technology. Uwe is currently a member of the technical committee for terminology at the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and teaches graduate courses in Terminology Management at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

products faster than those organizations that spend a lot of time and energy correcting terminological inconsistencies during the editing and review phase.

Correcting terminological inconsistencies in existing documents and mitigating the negative impact this additional quality assurance step has on a project's budget and its release schedule is not the worst-case scenario. Much worse would be the case of a postponed launch caused by delays in the regulatory approval process because of incorrect or inconsistent terminology in the submission documents. I know of a submission that was rejected outright by a foreign regulatory body due to translation and terminology issues, which resulted in several million dollars in lost revenue.

> *"It's no easy task to identify the words that are important enough to mandate their consistent use within and across documents."*

What are the Steps Involved in Managing Terminology?

Terminology Research

It's no easy task to identify the words that are important enough to mandate their consistent use within and across documents. If the organization has a team of terminology stakeholders (representatives from R&D, operations, technical, and marketing communications, not to forget legal) that identifies and collects terms, the challenge is to reach consensus among the various groups and interests.

If there is no terminology circle in place, which is the most typical scenario in the business world today, and the members of the various groups have already generated a wide variety of documents (specifications, software user interface, user assistance documents, legal, and marketing documents for instance), it may be difficult to analyze all of the documents connected with a launch for consistent terminology. And even if all of these documents were available in one place, the sheer volume of text might be too high for human processing.

Entry Creation

Once the issue of which terms should go into the termbase has been resolved, the next question to answer is: How much additional information do I need to enter? It is debatable if it makes business sense to collect anything beyond simple term lists. ISO 12620 catalogs almost 200 possible data categories for a terminological entry. At the same time, ISO 12616 lists only three of these data categories (term, source, and date) as mandatory. For many if not most organizations, the most practical solution will arguably be a data model that consists of less than two dozen data categories.

All major terminology standards treat definitions as an optional data category. While writing a definition can easily be the most time-consuming and expensive part of creating an entry, a definition is typically the most valuable part of an entry. Definitions are especially valuable if the terminology database is being used as the universal knowledge base that it can be: The definition helps technical staff members 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 aside for those who struggle with writing definitions: A terminological definition and an encyclopedic entry are two very different things. A good, standards-compliant terminological definition is a concise statement that should not be longer than one sentence and that identifies a more generic group the present term belongs to and the characteristics that distinguish it from related terms.

Example:
memory stick
electronic device for storing digital data that is more portable and robust than a typical hard drive

Termbase Review and Approval

There simply isn't a way around having subject-matter experts review monolingual and multilingual termbases prior to publication and use. Terminological collections are normative documents that should be used as references by all communicators within an organization as well as its external vendors of communication services such as marketing, advertising, and translation. For this reason, it is imperative that a person who is familiar with both the domain the termbase covers and the organization that sponsors the terminology project, reviews and approves each and every entry.

The reviewer's job is to evaluate the accuracy of the definitions and, if an entry contains more than one term (synonyms), decide which terms are desirable and should be used (preferred terms) and which ones shouldn't (deprecated terms). Translated glossaries should be reviewed by a bilingual subject-matter expert who works in the country where the target language of the translated glossary is spoken.

Termbase Maintenance

The old adage that the only constant in the business world is change certainly applies to terminology management. Since both

technology and language are constantly evolving, glossaries and termbases should too. Put differently: To be able to provide internal and external communicators with the up-to-date terminology they need, the terminological collections must not only be continuously expanded, but existing entries have to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO START A TERMINOLOGY PROJECT?

The best time to start developing terminology for a specific project is before the first source document in a global campaign is written. The organization's terminology circle should formalize an initial glossary of new terms for features and functions at the specification stage. This glossary will grow and mature as the new product or service evolves. If you initiate terminology management any later, such as by extracting terms from existing documents, you will inevitably change some or all of these documents to harmonize terminology.

Changing documents late in the game is by necessity expensive and time-consuming: A study conducted in the automobile industry (see Figure 1) indicates that a terminology change at the maintenance stage (after publication,
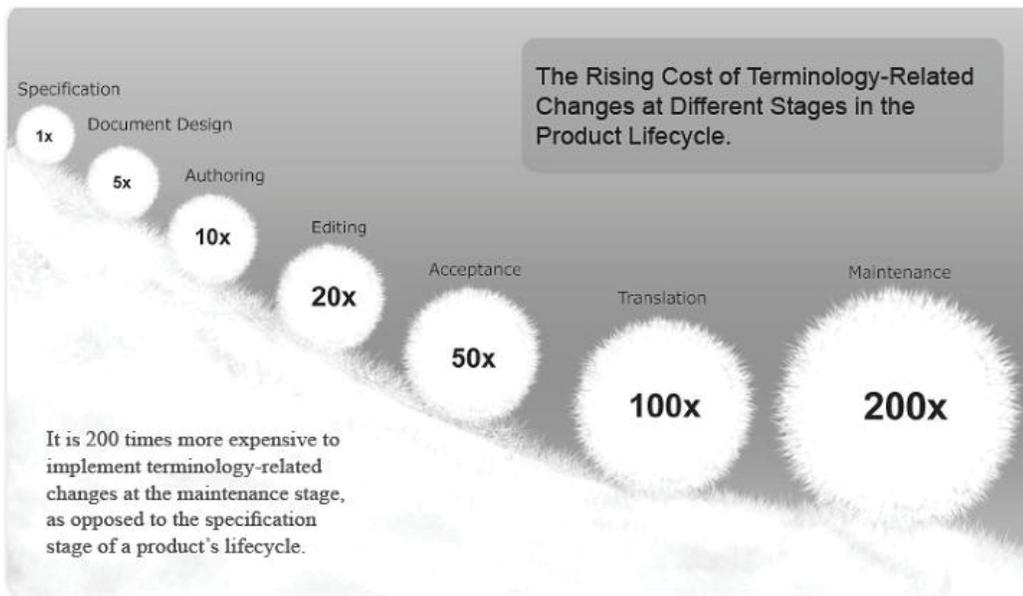

FIGURE 1: THE SNOWBALLING COST OF CORRECTING TERMINOLOGY (SOURCE: SCHÜTZ, MULTIDOC PROJECT)

for instance) is 200 times more expensive than a change at the product data stage (at the specification stage, for instance).

WHAT INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT?

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has created several standards that provide best practices in terminology management:

ISO 704:2009 Terminology work—Principles and methods
This 65-page document is an excellent introductory text to terminology management, including guidelines for writing definitions.

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 12620:2009 Computer applications in terminology—Data categories
This document specifies the data categories that should be used to ensure easy data exchange between systems that store and process terminology.

In addition to the standards on terminology management proper, ISO publishes literally hundreds of standards that contain monolingual and multilingual glossaries.

Additionally, many national standards bodies, as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations, publish extensive domain-specific glossaries that may be helpful in jump-starting a terminology management project.

WHAT SOFTWARE PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT?

A number of software products can help your organization manage its terminology, including the following:

♦ CSOFT TermWiki
<http://www.termwiki.com>

♦ Interverbum TermWeb
<http://www.interverbumtech.com>

♦ SDL MultiTerm Server
<http://www.sdl.com>

♦ STAR WebTerm
<http://www.star-group.net>

♦ Terminotix LogiTermWeb
<http://www.terminotix.com>