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Cloud-based translation memory tools are changing the way translators work and train

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By: **Uwe Muegge**

Cloud-based translation memory systems have been available for more than a decade. Based on recent translation tools surveys and anecdotal evidence, the vast majority of translators continues to use desktop translation software. Despite the fact that cloud-based translation systems offer many advantages over traditional desktop products, including support for multiple linguists working on the same document at the same time and, due to the subscription business model, the need for a dramatically lower initial investment.

What's so great about cloud-based translation memory systems?

No application to install

While some cloud-based translation memory systems require users to install a thin client, such as a plug-in for Microsoft Word, many rely entirely on the functionality of a standard web browser to connect to the remote web server. Since, in all cloud-based TM systems, the heavy lifting (e.g. segmentation, TM lookup, and glossary lookup) is done on the server side, users of cloud-based systems don't have to worry about the involved, multi-step installation procedures characteristic of conventional desktop translation memory products. Typically, all it takes to get started with a cloud-based system is Internet connection and for the user to sign up for the service, et voila, the system is instantly available.

Up-to-date translation software, every time!

One of the most inefficient, and truthfully quite maddening, aspects of working with traditional translation memory products are the required installations, bug fixes, service packs and updates—not to mention upgrades!—to keep the system running and in-sync with clients and colleagues. As a busy language professional, the last thing you want to do is spend (non-billable!) time on software maintenance.

With cloud-based systems, users don't have to worry about updating their software as maintenance is performed on the server-side. That is to say, the software vendor takes care of all updates, so users can rest assured that they always use the latest version of their software. A nice feature of cloud-based systems is the fact that updates are not only deployed automatically without user intervention, update cycles for cloud-based systems are also typically much shorter than those for traditional software products, with some cloud-based TM system vendors releasing new versions on a monthly basis.

Translate on a Mac or mobile device? No problem!

In the past, cross-platform support has been a major issue with commercial translation memory products. While it is certainly true that translation memory systems for non-PC operating systems have been available for more than ten years (with Wordfast as a pioneer in this area), the market-leading translation memory systems run only on Windows, even today.

Since cloud-based translation memory systems typically require very little processing power and memory on the user side, these systems support not only computers that run traditional operating systems (e.g. Windows, Mac OS, Linux), but also iOS- and Android-based mobile devices. In the age of cloud-based translation memory systems, translators no longer need to have expensive computers with fast processors and lots of disk space in order to take advantage of the latest translation technology. Any Internet-ready device, including tablets and even smart phones, can now do the job.

Easy collaboration

The benefits mentioned so far indicate that cloud-based translation memory systems are more convenient and easier to use than traditional desktop systems. That alone, in my opinion, would qualify this technology as an evolution of translation technology, not a revolutionarily new development. However, the following characteristics of cloud-based TM systems are game-changers for freelance translators, as well as for small and medium-sized language service provider businesses.

In a traditional translation environment, collaboration is possible but difficult, because sharing is a process separate from translation when using desktop software. If more than one translator per language wants, or *needs*, to participate in a project, the document to be translated has to be divided among translators, and the translators themselves need to export, e-mail and import translation memories and glossaries on a daily basis to leverage TM matches and ensure consistency. And even then, there is always a gap between TM updates, during which translators a) cannot benefit from the translations and potential TM matches their colleagues create, and b) create potential inconsistencies or conflicts with their colleagues' work. In other words, using desktop translation software to share TMs and glossaries among translators who work on the same document is a complex and highly inefficient strategy.

With a cloud-based TM system where all linguistic assets are stored on a single centralized server, sharing translation memories among multiple linguists is effortless: by granting other users access to your project, either through a simple system setup or via e-mail invitation, teams of almost any size can instantly collaborate. Translators can see and *leverage* the translations their colleagues create the moment a sentence is entered in the translation memory database. This means maximum productivity, maximum consistency, and no time wasted sending files and performing non-value-added management tasks.

Better yet, for urgent projects, cloud-based systems enable editors and reviewers to work on a document that is still in translation. As all data are stored in a single repository, using a cloud-based translation memory system can dramatically improve translation turnaround time compared to traditional desktop and closed server-based systems. Unlike previous computing environments that force users to structure projects sequentially and manually perform handoffs whenever they want to share information, cloud-based systems give multiple users in multiple roles simultaneous access automatically!

Workflow, project management, and portal functions

Another nice feature of **many cloud-based translation memory systems** is that they **offer more features than most traditional desktop translation memory products.** For instance, many cloud-based TM systems support workflow functions that will automatically notify a designated person once a specific phase of a translation project has been completed (e.g. notifying an editor after the translation phase, or a reviewer on the client side after the editing phase).

Speaking of clients, some cloud-based translation memory systems make complete translation portals available to their users. In this type of translation environment, clients of freelance translators or small translation agencies can log on to the system and instantly have access to automated quotes for new projects or status information for existing ones, all at the push of a few buttons. These portals can give clients of even the smallest translation business an unprecedented level of customer service without causing the slightest distraction to linguists.

But it doesn't stop there! **Many cloud-based translation memory systems offer additional features in one or more of the following areas:**

- machine translation (for post-editing, performance optimization)
- instant messaging (to resolve translation issues with a colleague in real-time)
- quality assurance (through automatic terminology and TM consistency checks and by the integrity of tagging, formatting and numbers)
- customer management and reporting (e.g. client rankings by revenues)
- billing and online payment

Low cost solution

Most of the services mentioned in the sections above have been available in web-based translation systems for a number of years. **What's *new* is the fact that users don't have to spend six figures on software that demands a high-end IT infrastructure, which requires specially trained human resources to operate.** Cloud-based translation memory systems are typically available on a subscription basis, and users only pay for what they use, month by month. With cloud-based TM systems, there are no huge up-front costs and no long-term commitments. And with plans starting at less than $50 per month, even translators just starting out in the translation business can begin using this incredibly powerful technology today.

How are cloud-based translation tools changing the profile of professional translators?

Clients want shorter translation turnaround times, which requires more collaboration among linguists

Going forward, more buyers of translation services will explore 'simship' strategies where the goal is to release a product or service on the domestic and international markets simultaneously. One of the tactics that can be employed in a simship environment is having multiple linguists work on the same document at the same time. In a cloud-based translation memory system, where a translation is automatically updated in real time after each addition or change, collaborative translation is fairly easy. In fact, it is even possible to have one or more editors edit a document while a team of translators still works on the translation. In this type of collaborative environment, translators can not only leverage the matches created by their team mates, translators also benefit from the instant feedback provided by the editor(s).

As cloud-based tools are better understood by buyers and providers of language services, the nature of freelance translation will change dramatically. **While today most freelance linguists work in isolation, tomorrow's translators, editors, terminologists, reviewers, etc. will, because of the power of the cloud, give and take much more than they do today. In order to be successful in a collaborative environment, linguists will have to develop and cultivate a team player's mentality.**

More collaboration requires more preparation

Is having more linguists participate in any given translation project by necessity mean faster completion and higher quality? Not at all! As the saying goes "Too many cooks spoils the broth!" In a translation context, simply adding more linguist to a project may actually decrease overall productivity, not to mention quality, if individual writing styles are incompatible, necessitating large-scale editing/re-writing. To avoid inconsistencies at the translation stage, collaborative projects, even more so than traditional translation projects, require that comprehensive, project-specific shared terminology databases are available early in the project.

If my professional experience is any indication, many professional translators today are, shall we say, 'uncomfortable' with tasks like terminology extraction, glossary generation, and terminology checking. With the growing popularity of collaborative translation, not to mention crowdsourcing, and translation buyers becoming more mature, linguists will have to be proficient in the use of terminology management tools.

Cloud-based translation tools make it easier for universities to offer translation tools courses

Two of the best features of cloud-based translation tools make it easier than ever for universities to provide their students with instruction in translation technology: Low cost and platform independence. With traditional desktop- or server-based software, institutions typically have to make a heavy investment in software and hardware before they can offer courses in translation tools. It is not uncommon for an educational institution to spend tens of thousands of dollars annually on licensing fees and maintenance contracts for translation installed on computers in expensive labs. Not so with cloud-based translation tools: Users typically pay a low monthly, usage-based subscription fee – no upfront costs, no long-term contracts. And no need for a computer lab, either. As many cloud-based translation systems run on any device that supports a web browser, students can use their own laptops, tablets, and in some cases even smart phones.

With all of the compelling benefits of cloud-based translation systems, there really is no reason why an institution that teaches translation should not be teaching translation tools and processes. I have been using cloud-based translation tools (translation memory, translation management, machine translation, and terminology management systems) since 2008, and I would not want to go back to the desktop. Especially now that more than 30% of my students use devices in class that run an operating system other than Windows, i.e. Mac OS, iOS, Android, and yes, Linux. And have I mentioned that I am using software that is completely free? To see cloud-based translation software (and a cloud-based learning management system) in action, watch this brief video.