



About Missed Opportunities

The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost also publishes a free technical newsletter for translators (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit).

Crowdsourcing... a term so terrible it makes the professional translator do one of two things: her knees go weak and her heart shudders, or he cries out (in a slightly hysterical tone), “Terrible translation quality! Terrible!”

Our industry has been talking about this phenomenon for about two years now. Common Sense Advisory has even come up with a new acronym for it: CT3, or “community, crowdsourced, and collaborative translation”; I am so glad they did not propose C11g (remember L10n for Localization?!)

In my opinion, it is high time to stop going in circles in our deliberations.

Let me start this discussion with an example with which we are all familiar and which I hope will illustrate my point. When translation environment tools (TEnTs) first hit the market in the early 1990s, they were adopted relatively quickly by technologically savvy end-clients and language services providers, but the majority of translators fell into a kind of shock mode. Many saw it as a real threat to the translation business as we knew it (and they were right) and, as such, highly undesirable (here they were wrong). Essentially, this new technology made the professional translator do one of two things: his knees went weak and his heart shuddered, or she cried out (in a slightly hysterical tone), “Terrible translation quality! Terrible!”

The next step was that these tools were increasingly modified for their paying user group. Terminology management was not implemented from a translator’s perspective but from that of the corporate or academic terminologist; new features were focused on things like project management rather than linguistic features such as morphology or improved translation memory searches; and the price of these tools was forbiddingly high. While this was not true for each of the

TEnTs that was available, it was certainly true for the market-leading tools, some of which we still see today.

Imagine for a moment what would have happened if we had embraced some or all of the technology offered by TEnTs (translation memory, terminology management, advanced text extraction, quality assurance, etc.) from the get-go. I will stick my neck out here and say that we would have a different technology landscape today. Terminology management and integration into workflows would be easier (or would be used much more because it would have been easier at a much earlier point); morphological and syntactical features for a wide variety of languages would have been implemented long ago in both terminology and translation memory searches; and relatively recent developments like subsegment searches would already be a natural part of our processes. And who knows what else we would have at this point?

To me, the moral of this story is that we always have a choice not to become part of new developments in technology or processes, but our decisions carry consequences that might influence the way this technology or this process develops in the future—almost independently of whether we embrace it at some later point.

Let’s switch back to crowdsourcing. While there has been a lot of attention recently on the crowdsourcing attempts by Facebook or the botched attempt by LinkedIn, some form of crowdsourcing has been around for a long time. Think of the translation of open-source software or the volunteer translation of many shareware or freeware programs. Think of Microsoft’s attempts to discuss terminology with its user base, dotSUB’s translation of subtitles in videos, or even projects like the

crowdsourced translation of Harry Potter novels (for German, see www.had-community.de/HaD). All of these and many other past and ongoing projects have felt nonthreatening to us, so why are we now so up in arms about a concept that only seems new? I think it is because we are scared to lose something we think is ours. We feel our industry has some kind of inherent right to the translation of applications and websites of multi-billion-dollar companies like Facebook. After all, we are set up for it; we have the tools, the expertise, and the processes in place that could successfully accomplish these projects.

The only problem is that Facebook apparently did not think so. The Facebook management team thought it could create the “perfect” translation if its volunteer users translated site content. Users could make Facebook just the way they wanted it, thereby building the already strong relationship with Facebook into an even stronger one by giving users a sense of ownership—after all, they “created” their Spanish or German Facebooks through translation—and making them the best ambassadors imaginable for the site. While we all know there is no “perfect” translation, Facebook might have just come pretty close to it, despite the many “mistakes” our critical eyes might find in the translated versions of Facebook. Facebook created a value-added translation. By the way, Facebook did not do this on the cheap. Facebook invested a lot of money and research into creating an application that allows for the translation and voting system that is now in place for its own site, which has just been released for free for any partner site of Facebook.

Is Facebook’s example transferable? I think in some cases it is—for community-oriented products, for

instance—but for most other projects it is not. At least not in the way that Facebook does it. To harness the energy and knowledge of an enthusiastic crowd, which in turn makes it even more enthusiastic, you will obviously need to be able to start out with a certain kind of enthusiasm that most products and services cannot claim for themselves. (Even if that is potentially the case, as it was with LinkedIn, its undiplomatic and heavy-handed attempt at crowdsourcing and the subsequent formation of the LinkedIn group Translators Against Crowdsourcing for Commercial Business shows that there needs to be more than just an enthusiastic crowd.)

So, it seems that two questions remain: Are projects like Facebook completely closed to professional translators? Is crowdsourcing applicable to other kinds of projects (and as an extension of that, would that be desirable)?

I think the answer in both (or even all three) cases is yes.

Community-based Facebook-like projects will stay closed to us only if we allow that to happen. Again, Facebook did not attempt this project as a money-saver, but because it saw the added value. Would projects like this benefit from professional experience in areas like translation techniques, terminology management, translation memory maintenance, and the various other skills that are part of our trade? Are you kidding? Of course they would! And it is up to us to offer that in a palatable way (and “palatable” is not a synonym for “free” or “cheap”). What we have is unmatched expertise, a good track record, and a right to be treated in a professional manner (something that LinkedIn did not do). But what we do not have is the right to translate anyone’s applica-



Google Translator Toolkit Update

After the October issue went to press with my article, “Let’s Talk: Trados and the Google Translator Toolkit” (page 18), Google released a new version of its Translator Toolkit on October 15. And since Google is not known for “thinking small,” the number of languages that are now covered is rather large: 37 source languages and more than 300 target languages (even Latin!), though most language pairs do not feature the automatic translation.

tion, website, or product without engaging in a professional relationship with them.

In what other areas is crowdsourcing applicable? The sudden emergence (or re-branding) of tools like Lingotek, Welocalize’s CrowdSight (an add-on to GlobalSight), or Google Translation Center shows that there is an obvious need that goes beyond the niche market of social networking. Companies like McElroy Translation show us that some elements of crowdsourcing can be used in a professional setting. This Austin company works on large, ongoing projects with almost immediate turnaround times. Rather than scheduling and organizing translators in a traditional one-translator-for-one-project way, they publish their projects on an internal site for large pools of translators, many of whom are guaranteed a certain amount of work and income every month provided that they check in on a regular basis. While this approach is not the same as the crowdsourcing that companies like Facebook offer—only prequalified professional translators are used (and paid for their work); there is no voting system for transla-

tions like Facebook offers; and it is a more strictly controlled system—it uses elements of crowdsourcing and “translates” it into a strictly professional environment. Companies like Facebook might still decide to use their own methods and tools, but it might also be attractive to go with translation providers like McElroy who can offer large-volume translations with extremely quick turnaround times. (After all, Facebook’s highly publicized 24-hour turnaround time for the translation into French was the starting point for this current wave of crowdsourcing.)

There is much more that can be said about crowdsourcing, but hopefully this illustrates that we do not do well by flat-out rejecting “new” ideas and concepts within our industry. We need to take on leadership roles, and we can learn from new ideas and implement them into our own workflow.

We must not forget the many opportunities we missed in playing an important role in the early development of TEnTs. Let’s not make the same mistake twice.

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