



GeekSpeak

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Shifting Gears for Smoother Termbase Performance

At this point in my life, I

think I am a pretty good driver. I must admit that I have received my share of speeding tickets here in the U.S., and to my continued surprise, trying to speak to the officer with a thick German accent has never really helped. However, I am glad—my wife would use the word “lucky”—to say that so far I am accident-free. I am not sure why my wife is so negative about my driving, because she was not even with me during one of my most embarrassing driving experiences.

Not long after I received my driver’s license, I rented a car with a manual transmission while I was on a business trip. I love driving with a stick shift, but the problem with this car was that I did not know how to put it into reverse. I did not realize until much later that you had to pull up a little lock-out ring right under the shift knob to switch into reverse. Being a guy did not help. I did not even consider asking anyone for help or clarification. So, believe it or not, I drove that car for two days in heavy city traffic without ever shifting into reverse (no parallel parking for me, baby!).

As ridiculous as my experience sounds, this is exactly what many of us do with our translation environment (TE) tools (formerly known as computer-assisted translation, or CAT tools). We use the translation memory component brilliantly because it is easy and does not require much intervention on our side. But the finer, more intricate part of those TE tools—the terminology component—is typically left by the wayside. Just like pulling the lock-out ring in my embarrassing car episode, we have to do something manually by actually selecting the terms and sending them to our termbase. Just as I am now embarrassed of my (former!) driving

shortcomings, you should feel equally embarrassed if you do not make the effort to discover the many benefits of a fine-tuned termbase.

Let’s not even go into the many qualities that make a termbase so powerful, such as consistency, increased translation speed, and quality assurance, to mention just a few. Instead, consider this: How often do you have a match for a whole segment (translation unit) from your translation memory? If your text is repetitive you may have five or six matches throughout a document, but usually it is not even that many. How often are terms or expressions repeated within a text—20, 50, 100 times? And while you could use the so-called concordance function that many tools offer to search for that term in the translation memory database, you would still be manually pulling up the “lock-out ring” 50 times rather than just once. With a souped-up termbase, that tedious process takes care of itself.

I have been talking about terminology management in my newsletter recently, and I have received some very interesting responses from readers. One of these respondents claimed that while terminology management may be good for languages with little flexion, it can be a nightmare for languages with a lot of flexion (think Slavic languages) or agglutinative languages (such as Turkish or Finnish). True, we do have to adjust our strategies to the languages that we translate, such as sending not just the infinitive or nominative forms to the terminology database, but also various inflected forms. But this is only feasible if the tools we use make that process as painless as possible, and make the entering of term pairs into termbases truly a one-

click affair. Some tools already offer this, while others are still a bit challenged in this aspect. Another challenge for the tool makers is to strengthen their fuzzy (or even morphological) search features of their terminology component.

Another reader’s response was related to text types. He pointed out that for some text types, such as technical, legal, or medical, terminological consistency is a necessity. For other types of texts, such as literary, journalistic, or marketing, the use of classic TE tools becomes unnecessary or even burdensome. I completely agree. I also think that the “techie” within the translation community probably need to communicate more clearly. When we are talking about the benefits of translation technology, we should make sure to specifically differentiate between the more literary genres and others.

Still, for most translation professionals in most languages with most TE tools, the terminology component remains a sorely underused mechanism. I am pleased to say that I now regularly throw my hot 1991 Lincoln Continental into reverse at will. Can you say the same of your terminology usage?

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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).