

Navigating the Translation Environment Tool Market

By Jost Zetzsche

As I was recently reading several exhaustive overviews¹ of the complex world of translation environment tools², it dawned on me how difficult and intimidating it must be for someone who's not an expert in this field to wade through the technical details and make an educated decision on what tool to buy.

In previous issues of *The ATA Chronicle* and elsewhere, including my newsletter³, there's been plenty of support for the necessity of translation environment tools for professional translators. Instead of repeating all of this, I've put together some suggestions on how to choose a tool that's right for you.

Interestingly, your first step should NOT be to look at what's out there. Instead, you should first look at your own work processes, your clients, and your work environment according to a number of categories. Once you understand how these categories relate to you, then you can go out and see which of the tools correspond to your needs. (Please note that these categories are geared toward the typical freelance translator rather than a corporate setup.)

Category I: Which file formats do you work with?

To answer this very important question, you need to look at two things: which file formats have you worked in during, say, the last six months, and what kind of file formats will you work in during the next year or so. Though this last part may sound somewhat silly (duh—how would I know?!), look at it in light of your own development. Are you planning to change fields or develop other areas of expertise that may require working in different file formats? Or is your particular field changing (for instance, from Word to HTML or

XML, or from PageMaker to InDesign, etc.)?

For the typical translator, there are five different kinds of file formats:

1. Office files (word processing, spreadsheet, presentation);
2. Tagged files (HTML, XML, SGML);
3. Desktop publishing files (InDesign, Quark, FrameMaker, etc.);
4. Database content; and
5. Software development formats.

“...We should not sell ourselves short as far as the complexity of what we do and our ability to learn new and better ways to do it...”

While virtually all translation environment tools support Office files, it is important to know which of the other file formats are supported by a tool you are considering purchasing.

Category II: What do your clients use?

Do your clients use a translation environment tool? If not, then this question is irrelevant. If they do, what kind of file formats do they send you (already prepared for use in a translation environment tool [“pretranslated”] or the original source file), and what kind of delivery do they expect (a file in the original format with an accompanying translation memory, or in a bilingual translation environment tool format)?

It is important to realize that “just because” your clients use a certain tool does not necessarily mean that you have to use it as well (although there

are situations where it can be helpful). In the case of TRADOS, various other translation environment tools support TRADOS formats (Déjà Vu, SDLX, or Heartsome, and, if it's in Word format, Wordfast or MetaTaxis). SDLX files are now supported by TRADOS (see above). Star Transit files are SGML-based and can be processed in a variety of other formats (even though it's tedious). And the list goes on.

It becomes a little trickier if your clients deliver original source files (HTML, Word, Excel, etc.) and expect you to deliver files in a specific translation environment tool format. While there are sometimes ways around that as well, it becomes more and more involved, and at some point it may just be easier to actually go with that specific tool.

And last, a number of tools offer free versions for certain projects that have been prepared in an enterprise edition (SDLX, Déjà Vu, and Transit, as well as most of the localization tools). This is not only a good way to try out a new tool (albeit with limited functionality), but it's also fun to work in another environment every once in awhile.

Category III: What kind of projects do you work in?

Are you working in projects that consist of one or a small handful of files at a time, or do you tend to work in projects that consist of many more files? Some tools handle one file as a translation project unit, while others treat projects that can contain a lot of files as one translation project unit. If you work in multi-file projects, you will find it easier to go with the project-based approach. There are little programs, though, that allow the concatenation of single files to one large file for processing in a translation environment tool. One of ➡

them, Syscat by ECM-Engineering, does this specifically for TRADOS Word-based files.

Category IV: What is the support like?

This question refers not just to the support from the parent company (though this is important), but also from user groups. Most tools have a user group at Yahoo! Groups that you can quickly locate by just typing the product name into the search field at groups.yahoo.com. Here are a few tips:

- Never ask for a comparison of any of the tools on any of these groups. Typically the users on these groups strongly favor one tool or another, and their responses will tend to confuse you.
- Look at how active and supportive the groups are. This will give you a good indication of how fast you can expect a response, and what kind of response it will be.
- Evaluate how technical the answers are. This will not only give you a good idea of how technical the users are, but it may be an indication of the technical expertise that is needed to use the tool.

Your immediate peers, the folks you work with day-in and day-out in (virtual) work groups, are also an important support consideration. If they already use a certain tool and are generally happy with it, that should be a strong indication for you as well, because typically they will tend to work on the same kinds of projects and for the same kinds of clients as you.

As far as support by the parent company, a look through the user groups and/or the support options offered (both initial and ongoing) should also give you a good idea of what to expect.

And again, don't trust what users of Tool A say about Tool B! People tend to be rather protective of "their tool!"

Category V: How skilled are you with computers? How much do you want to pay?

For many, these are the two most important questions. The fact that I lumped them together and put them last goes to show that I don't believe these are nearly as important as people think.

I received an interesting comment from a reader of my newsletter a while back in regard to the first question:

In my opinion, any application interface must be intuitive. If it isn't, if an application requires any additional training, it's a poorly designed application. [Many translation memory tools are examples] of such applications. On the other hand, applications made by Microsoft are examples of good design. Yes, they make money on training, but they do not teach people how to use MS Word because it is not necessary.

Here's how I responded:

As far as Word is concerned, I think it's sort of like speaking English. It's easy to speak a little bit, but it's hard to speak it well. The basic tasks within Word, such as typing, are really easy. However, most people do not use 95% of its functionality because they don't understand it. In my opinion, the problem with TM tools is that the most basic task, translating with the aid of a translation memory, is fairly advanced to start with. So in that sense, I think it isn't fair to compare them with Word.

We should not sell ourselves short as far as the complexity of what we do and our ability to learn new and better ways to do it.

If you feel challenged in the area of technological complexity, the one thing I would look for in a tool is its maturity (not to be confused with age). If users continuously stumble on bugs in the program, this may be a red flag.

As far as the purchase price, let me quote Marc Prior, the developer of the free Java-based translation memory tool OmegaT (www.omegat.org):

Computer-aided translation tools are cheap. A tool like TRADOS or Déjà Vu will cost in the order of 1,000 Euro. If you're not planning on turning that over in a week or so, you should revise your business strategy. [Author's note: In many cases, these tools will cost less than what Mr. Prior quoted.]

Enough said.

Notes:

1. In a recent issue of the German translators' association's *Mitteilungen für Dolmetscher und Übersetzer* by Uta Seewald-Heegand (a 15 MB downloadable version is available in German at <http://tinyurl.com/awzmr>). An even more comprehensive 300-page overview in book form by François Massion (*Translation Memory System im Vergleich*, doculine Verlags-GmbH, 2005) is also available.
2. I'm hoping this term will soon replace the inaccurate "computer-aided translation tools" we've used in the past.
3. See www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit.

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