



## Online Translation Memories

**In my last few** newsletters, I have discussed the pros and cons of online translation memories (TMs); that is, server-based TMs that can be simultaneously accessed by various translators). This is a relevant and very current question because many products now offer this feature. In fact, for some products, server-based TMs are at the very core of their functionality. For instance, there is Lionbridge's Logoport; commercially available tools like Idiom, across, the server-based editions of Trados, as well as SDLX, MemoQ, Fusion, Lingotek, Wordfast, and Alchemy Language Exchange; and various other tools. Each of these tools has recognized and responded to the need for real-time sharing of TMs.

And at first glance it is hard to find anything wrong with this. True to the very concept of translation reuse with TMs, it simply does not seem to make sense to duplicate translation and terminology research efforts across different project participants. Why not access the data that my colleague has already worked on in real-time? In the pre-online-TM days, large projects that required the cooperation of various translators (and editors and proofreaders) were often frustrating. The nightly or weekly TM data exchange among the different participants in the project was (and, in many cases, still is) a very manual and tedious process that often resulted in a good amount of rework (fixing translations or stylistic issues that were done inconsistently) and quite a bit of overhead work with downloading, importing, and merging TMs. Some of us were able to negotiate payment for that kind of work; others were not. Plus, the quality of those TMs often declined rapidly as well. Not every team member was up to par on maintaining his part of the TM, and often

no one was really responsible for keeping the TM clean.

Still, some of my readers had very strong opinions that came out against the use of these TMs. Here is a sampling of their complaints:

- There is no control over the state of the TM.
- TMs are misaligned or otherwise of poor quality.
- There is less freedom to choose a work environment because of the requirement of constant online access.
- There are always potential access problems to TMs outside of normal working hours with no one there to fix it.

Let's look at each of these valid points in more detail.

**Lack of control and quality of the TMs:** Yes, there is a loss of control when dealing with TMs that you have not created yourself and for which you cannot guarantee the quality. And if the TM is not well managed—which many are not—the quality issues do in fact come up. TMs are only as good as the content that is entered, and problematic TMs not only do not help, they actually hinder the progress of a project by multiplying the problems. However, the poor TM maintenance that we sometimes see is because we are still dealing with relatively new technology. There is a learning curve, and I am certain that the job title of *TM Maintenance Specialist* will be very common in the not-too-distant future. (How does that sound for a second, third, or fourth career?). Also, aside from the human factor, there is still plenty that can be done to carry out quality control checks automatically with the respective programs. This will have to include the flagging

of duplicate and differently translated entries, sophisticated user access models, and terminology control through links to well-maintained terminology databases, among others.

**Online access:** Most of the products mentioned earlier give you the choice of either downloading the relevant data to work offline and then uploading the data to the main TM ("synchronization"), or working on a live database. The benefit of real-time communication among the different translators/editors/proofreaders is certainly lost when using the first route. I think that in this question we find ourselves in a twilight zone between eras. With the exception of some remote locations, ubiquitous online access will be a reality in just a few years, and until then we may just have to plan around hotspots if we like to work while being mobile.

**Database uptime:** Whether we like it or not, it has become a reality that large companies, both on the language service provider side and on the client side, have become multinational and are often available around the clock with business centers worldwide. Still, when working with smaller companies, downtime after business hours might occur, and there simply have to be strategies in place to deal with this, such as an emergency contact or payment to the translator during the lost time. (That does not sound so bad, does it?) And beyond that, we certainly need to see robust products where downtimes are the rare exception.

Nobody would question that communication is an important facet of work in a work group, whether it is virtual or not. At its lowest possible

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denominator, a shared TM is nothing but a subtle and powerful communication tool. While there are limitations that have not yet been completely overcome, most of us will get used to this next stage of the TM evolution.

And if you cannot or simply prefer

not to get used to working with online TMs, it is certainly your choice to continue working with smaller clients who are less likely to use that technology.

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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](http://www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit)).

The Onionskin is a client education column launched by the ITI Bulletin (a publication of the U.K.'s Institute of Translation and Interpreting) in 1996. Comments and leads for future columns are very welcome; please include full contact details. Contact: [chrisdurban@noos.fr](mailto:chrisdurban@noos.fr).