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As Iron Sharpens Iron…

I have recently worked on a number of projects that have made me realize once again how much our profession is changing.

One project illustrated that in particular. It was a project with 15,000 or so words—or maybe I should say it was a project with 15,000 or so words or so, since I really did not translate many "words" at all. Instead, it was actually just managing language chunks that were all in the translation memory (TM) and termbase. All I needed to do for the entire project was to rearrange and newly arrange. I am not really complaining—it was a well-paid project—and it certainly was not the first project of its kind on which I have worked. But more than ever before it got me thinking: Where is the line between translation and "language management?" And while "language management" still sounds fairly lofty, activities like this should probably more appropriately be termed "language chunk management."

Obviously I do not mean to complain about the rise of language technology and how it has changed our profession. There is no doubt that it has. What I really wonder is this: Are we caught between a technology that allows us to work much more proficiently by taking away so much of the repetitiveness and brainlessness that we used to get frustrated with, but which is still not good enough to automate the last missing repetitive pieces?

I know that for some of you, I have already raised your hackles, but I really think that language technology needs to take the next jump in the commercial applications that most of us are working in. It is a shame that some advanced technology exists but is not yet readily available for most of us. For instance, I am talking about better confluences of machine translation and translation memory, maybe through Google Translate as presently included in Lingotek, or maybe through some of the partnerships between translation memory and machine translation vendors such as the one between Across and Language Weaver. We need more advanced "chunk replacement techniques" and paths of communication between TMs and termbases as they are used in Déjà Vu's EBMT feature or Heartsom's Quick Translation and Swordfish's Auto-Translation. What we also need is better sub-segmentation processes. For those features, Multitrans or MemoQ have an advantage over other tools. We need ready-made access to online TMs, and not just for corporate tools—sort of what Wordfast offers with its VLTM technology. And the list could go on and on.

The other day, I was introducing a group of folks to translation technology, and they asked me why no one has ever come up with the idea of taking all these good things and combining them into one tool. I did not want to look really stupid so I said, well, that is because it is not easy to implement technology quickly that someone else spent years developing. But as I was saying that I felt even more stupid because that is really not what it is. I certainly do not have the complete answer, but I think part of it is that often developers live in a slightly different world from the practitioners, that is, the translators. And if they have come up with a couple of good features, as they all have, they tend to get stuck with them instead of going on a truly never-ending quest for the ever-more-sharpened tool.

And though it is always easy to blame the tool vendors, the ball should end up in our—the users'—court. It is up to us to demand those missing features and, if our particular tool vendor does not listen, either to take our business elsewhere or (and this is where it becomes really hairy and demanding) to join one of the ongoing open-source projects.

These truly sharpened tools, filed by the friction of iron upon iron, user upon developer, real life experience and requirements upon theoretical foundations, are not pie in the sky. We need them. Let's work together to sharpen them into reality.

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