

Trends in TRANSLATION

BY WALTER BACAK

Editor's note: Walter Bacak is the executive director of the American Translators Association (ATA), one of more than thirty non-profit communication organizations with which STC regularly shares information. ATA fosters the professional development of translators and interpreters and promotes the translation and interpretation professions.

Translation, like technical communication, is a profession that is difficult to get a clear picture of at any one time. As for the trends in translation, the similarities to technical communication are especially striking. Here is a look at some important trends in the translation profession.

Growth

The market for translation services continues to expand. The translation market, encompassing human translation, machine-aided translation, and software and Web site localization, is expected to grow from over \$11 billion in 1999 to close to \$20 billion in 2004, according to the technology research company Allied Business Intelligence. In comparison, the 1998 forecast was \$10.4 billion in 1998 with a projected growth to \$17.3 billion in 2003.

Much of the growth in this industry is due to the same forces affecting growth in the demand for technical communication, and is fueled by the Internet's global reach. The demand for more comprehensive and higher-quality documentation extends to other countries and hence to many languages. In addition, companies that want to expand their markets are hav-

ing to look outside their national borders for more business. Increased competition has forced companies to participate in the global economy.

Outsiders

This growth has attracted much interest in the industry from those outside the translation community. It seems that until recently, most translation services companies were founded by linguists with more work than they could handle individually: They expanded to offer the translation services of others under the umbrella of one company.

Over the past two years or so, we have seen an increase in the number of individuals without a language background who get into the business as owners of

translation services companies. In addition, we have seen more outside funding through partnerships, venture capitalists, and investment bankers, who see money to be made in translation services as long as they include a software/Internet/technology component.

Localization

The global economy and heightened competition have also spurred a dramatic increase in the demand for the translation of computer programs, Web sites, and related documentation along with a reduction in the time available to get a product to market. Localization involves translating content and adapting it to local cultures—changing not only content, but also graphics, colors, time and



date formats, units of measurement, currency, and symbols.

"Localization has always been part of the translation process," says Muriel Jérôme-O'Keeffe, president of JTG, Inc., an international communications company in Alexandria, Virginia. "It is just a sexier term for translation. The key to localization is translation, and there is a shortage of qualified translators in this field."

Mergers and Acquisitions

In 1998, Allied Business Intelligence wrote that, in its eight years of researching different industries, it had never come across an industry as large as translation services that was so fragmented. Today, the industry is still fragmented, with very few large players, but that phenomenon is starting to change through mergers and acquisitions.

At this point many of the largest companies are trying to position themselves as *the* leader in the worldwide marketplace, while the next level of companies are working to find new niches. At the boutique level, many language vendors are focusing on quality and expertise, while the larger companies are seeking high volume and quick turnaround at low cost.



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The single-language vendors—independent contractors—are courted by all. “There is a shortage of qualified translators around the world, and the best are in high demand,” Jérôme-O’Keeffe said.

In the December 1999 edition of *Language International*, one contributor forecasted that, in the not-too-distant future, there will be a few large multilingual multinational translation services companies and lots of single-language boutiques

(such as companies specializing in German medical work) with not much in between. We are a long way from that scenario, but it is an interesting prediction.

Tools

In the United States, translation has one of the lowest barriers to entry of any profession. Anyone with a computer and a business card can claim to be a translator, but the market is the true test. Can the person get work? Do customers come back? (Note: ATA always recommends that you check a translator’s or interpreter’s references.) Now the barrier has been raised slightly, with some companies requiring their independent contractors to invest in and use specific computer-assisted translation software programs. These memory management tools compare current text with previous translations. According to Jérôme-O’Keeffe, the output requires practically no post-editing and can truly enhance productivity. These tools are best suited for documents that are regularly updated, such as user manuals or catalogs. Currently, translators can benefit from the fierce price war in translation management software.

On the machine translation front, the programs continue to improve, but many require extensive post-editing by human translators, not to mention “controlled English” for the input and a substantial investment in resources and tools. Free online machine translation, known as real-time translation, is available on the Web. Free sites give you a “gist” translation, meaning a rough idea of what the author is saying.

Fortune magazine’s technology review (Winter 2000) had this to say about machine translation: “Machine translation software is not to be used for publishing business documents in foreign languages. That’s a sure way to confuse and annoy international customers. A more serious difficulty with the software is that you can’t always trust the gist you seem to be getting. Even when it performs well, machine translation can easily convey the wrong idea about a document.”

According to Jérôme-O’Keeffe, free real-time translation software is a tool to

help you open up the possibilities of surfing foreign Web sites or to get a general idea of an e-mail. They can help you understand, but they are not to be used to communicate. If you want to see the process for yourself, do a simple “back translation.” That is, take the translated copy and retranslate it back into English.

As for the Internet, there has been a real increase in Web sites that will help a company find a translator or interpreter. In fact, there are now even some translation portals. These sites are trying to sell you translation services direct from either an individual or a translation services company. We will definitely see a shake-out in this area.

Summary

While these trends are in continual flux, the one constant is the need for the human touch in translation, to convey the nuances, subtleties, and norms of one language to another. ❶

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Find a Translator or Interpreter Online

The American Translators Association, the nation’s largest professional organization for translators and interpreters (more than 7,200 members), can help you find a translator or interpreter online. Visit ATA’s Web site at www.atanet.org. ATA offers two searchable databases: the year-old Translation Services Directory, which lists in-depth profiles of over 3,700 translators and interpreters, and the new Corporate Translation Services Directory, which features the profiles of companies offering translating and interpreting services. Both are free services.

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