Managing complex translation projects through virtual spaces: a case study

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Abstract

Globalisation has meant that companies and organisations are increasingly looking to get their point, product or service across to an international audience. This has led to a concomitant rise in the demand for translation and localisation services. The range of languages required and the often *ad hoc* nature of translation coupled with organisational drives to keep costs low, has meant that this demand is typically met through outsourcing translation projects to translation agencies, language service providers or freelancers. However, the complexity involved in translating and maintaining global content in multiple languages is immense. The issues surrounding translation are exemplified further when content needs to be delivered to customers in multiple formats, through multiple distribution channels in geographically dispersed locations. As a result global translation projects often suffer from issues such as:

- poor communication inter and intra staff within translation project teams

- lack of automated technology processes to manage, grow and protect translation assets, which put a company's intellectual property at risk

- delays in disseminating centralised terminology militate against content quality and consistency drives

- quality compromise as a result of pressure to deliver content in more languages in reduced time while operating under tighter budgets.

Thus, whilst outsourcing translation projects may reduce short-terms costs, the increased quality and information insecurity risks may mean a higher total cost in the long run.

Innovations in computer-aided translation software and server-based terminology management have improved the ability of disparate teams of translators to produce a more consistent output. However, there is much room for improvement in global collaboration processes and technology.

This paper explores the practical application of technologies and methods that translation companies and their clients can deploy to mitigate the risks of outsourced translations and increase the probability of a successful project outcome.

The paper focuses on the practical use of online collaboration tools such as 'virtual spaces' which can effectively support global project collaboration between geographically dispersed teams of translators.

The methodological tool employed is the descriptive case study method. The case study is based on the execution of a complex global translation project for a division within the United Nations. A key aspect of this was the use of a virtual online space to mediate all project communication and interaction. The outcome was faster project turnaround and greater terminology consistency and quality.

The main contribution of this paper is an analysis of the practical value of managing global translation projects through the use of virtual spaces.

Keywords

Terminology management, translation memory, global collaboration, virtual spaces, intranet, online collaboration, web 3.0, the semantic web, computer-mediated communication.

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1. Introduction

Globalisation has meant that companies and organisations are increasingly looking to get their point, product or service across to an international audience. This has led to a concomitant rise in the demand for translation and localisation services. The range of languages required and the often *ad hoc* nature of translation coupled with organisational drives to keep costs low, has meant that this demand is typically met through outsourcing translation projects to a Language Service Provider (LSP) or freelance translators. However, the complexity involved in translating and maintaining global content in multiple languages is immense. The issues surrounding translation are exemplified further when content needs to be delivered to customers in multiple formats, through multiple distribution channels in geographically dispersed locations. As a result global translation projects often suffer from issues such as:

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Thus, whilst outsourcing translation projects may reduce short-term costs, the increased quality and information insecurity risks may mean a higher total cost in the long run.

The translation industry has responded with innovations in computer aided translation software and server-based terminology management, which have improved the ability of disparate teams of translators to produce a consistent output. However, there is much room for improvement in global collaboration processes and technology.

This paper discusses an alternative approach to translation workflow for complex translation projects that improves the probability of a quality product via a mediated virtual space. Complex translation projects are defined as high volume (over 50,000 words), translation of non-standard texts into multiple languages requiring multiple translators in each language.

## 2. Case Study: a complex translation project for the United Nations

Strategic Agenda was approached by a division of the United Nations to translate a large report and associated project collateral into several languages within three weeks. The traditional use of in-house staff was not feasible given the lack of staff availability and the short deadline, but there were fears that without significant experience of, and expertise in, the specialised fields covered by the report the outcome would fall far below the high quality standards expected of a publication of this kind. The client organisation tendered the translation project in the hope that they would be able to find a Language Service Provider (LSP) that fitted the profile.

After a competitive tender process Strategic Agenda was selected and the project setup process embarked upon. From an analysis of the project requirements it was clear that deploying the traditional translation project management approach would not be sufficient.

An analysis of client requirements during the bidding process had highlighted that the high word count and short deadline meant that a team of translators would be needed. Complex, specialised texts require a far greater degree of research and term validation than simpler text hence the UN itself recommends that translators translate no more than 1500 words per day. This meant that at least four translators were needed in order to meet the project deadline. However, there is evidently an inverse relationship between the number of translators deployed on a project and the consistency of the final translation. To combat this risk, and the problems associated with the traditional translation lifecycle mentioned above, Strategic Agenda devised a translation process that involved greater client/translator interaction supported by a virtual space or collaboration platform (see Figure 1).

 The first phase of this process was the set up of a virtual project space. This space was an online meeting place where documents, messages and real time chat could take place in order to allow all team members to interact.

Figure 1: Example Translation Project Virtual Space
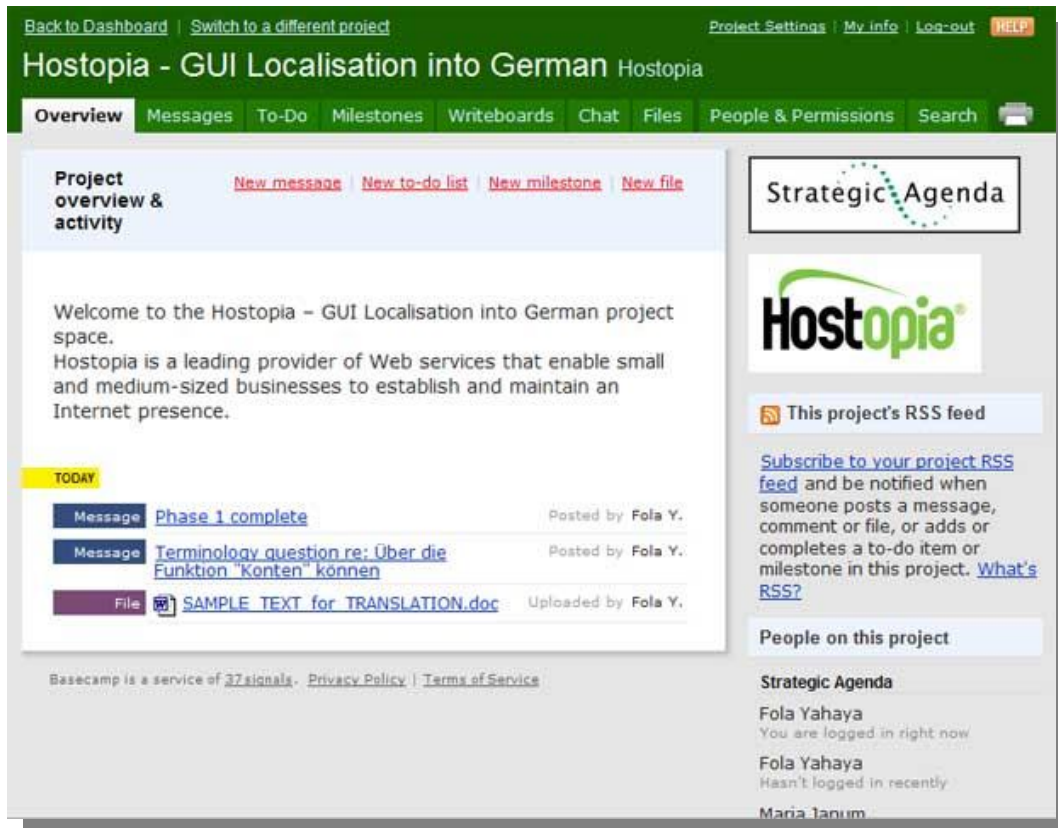
Strategic Agenda chose a hosted platform that excelled in usability and which had features including:

- Messaging via Outlook – users can reply to project questions via MS outlook

- Integrated chat room for real time discussion

- Group calendars

- Group to do lists

- Project whiteboard that enables interactive editing of a document

- Secure file management and sharing

- Granular permissioning structure that would allow for multiple levels of messaging. Messages can sent via the virtual space to individuals, language groups, just Strategic Agenda employees or clients or to everyone on the project

Once the space had been set up, team members were sent information on how to use it and were invited to participate in a real-time project kick off session in the project chat room to allow everyone to get to know their fellow translators and client counterparts understand roles and responsibilities and agree milestones. This virtual meeting was an important step in building *corps d'esprit* and breaking down the traditional divide between client reviewer and translator.

As part of the project set up phase, an extraction of the key terms within the text to be translated was conducted. Without an existing translation memory and a translation team of four geographically disparate translators, it was critical that there was firm agreement on the key terms in the document. Extraction was carried out using a tool called Multiterm Extract. Multiterm identifies and extracts corporate terminology using a powerful statistical analysis to determine the frequency of appearance of term candidates. Key terms were then extracted and translated by a single senior translator. These terms were then posted to the project space whiteboard for debate within a defined period before being sent to the client for final sign off.

Figure 2: Strategic Agenda Process for managing complex translation projects via virtual spaces

1. Project setup

- SA assesses project files & resource availability
- Project and client team created on virtual space
- Key terms extracted and refined iteratively with the mixed client translator team.
- Final termbase agreed and published through the virtual space

2. Translation

- Translator (s) interacts with client reviewer/author if necessary via project space
- Translator uploads completed draft file (s) to SA virtual sandbox
- Files assigned to proofreader for quality assurance (QA)

3. Proofreading

- Proofreader uploads proofread file to virtual space whiteboard and revises the file with the original translator report
- Proofread file sent back to translator for final approval and editing
- Translator uploads finalized files to virtual space

4. Delivery

- Project files are finalised by the SA (incl. formatting etc)
- Finalized files are made available for client download
- Changes and modifications within 15 days of delivery available to clients

5. Project Close

- If appropriate, client completes customer satisfaction feedback form
- SA project team discuss feedback and captures any lessons learned
- Client terminology databases updated
- Project files securely archived for 2 years on the virtual sapce

These terms were agreed by the client and then exported into a Multiterm termbase which was made available through the project space for use by the translators.

Stage two of the process was the iterative translation of documents which had been divided up and assigned to the translators. During this stage, translators were able to ask the client reviewers and their fellow translations questions relating to terminology and style. These questions were typically posted publicly and copied to all on the translation team, which meant instant adjustments could be made to the various segments.

Once the draft translation was complete a number of internal proofreading iterations were carried out during stage three between Strategic Agenda's translators and reviewers before the final document was presented to the client reviewer for final sign off in stage four.

The translation of all of the documents was achieved on target and the quality was adjudged to be excellent. Moreover the client acknowledged the key role played by an iterative translation process supported by virtual spaces.

3. Analysis of case study

The United Nations is one of the largest multilateral development agencies in the world, and is one of the largest global buyers of translation services. Traditionally most of its translation expenditure has been for the employment of in-house language specialists. However, in an attempt to reduce costs translation is being increasingly outsourced to third parties – typically freelancers or language service providers (LSPs). The speed of outsourcing has been slowed down by a certain degree of reluctance over using third parties who often inexperienced the often arcane terminology of various branches of the institution. In-house translators have had to pass rigorous and exceptionally competitive exams to achieve their coveted positions and there is still a perception that an LSP can never achieve the same level of quality as an experienced translator – many of whom are ex-staff members.

However, this reluctance to outsource holds little sway in an era of aggressive cost cutting and efficiency drives, so organisations are increasingly seeking out LSPs who can offer them the best of both worlds: direct access to experienced translators without the overhead of in-house staff. Innovations in translation technologies and processes in the last 10 years have seen the rapid uptake of translation management software and increasingly globalised translation projects designed to improve the quality of outsourced translation. Coupled with low cost, efficient communication channels translation has truly become a de-coupled industry, with work increasingly being carried out by decentralised and often geographically dispersed translation resources.

Yet, despite the increased availability of tools and technologies to support translation projects, traditional approaches still dominate the industry. Companies often have unrealistic expectations that translation is simple and that they can outsource their requirements to a third party only to have their expectations dashed when they receive sub-standard translations carried out using a standard translation lifecycle approach. The traditional translation lifecycle involves the following steps:

- document divided into parts

- parts assigned to individual translators

- translators work in isolation

- reviewers consolidate individual sections into a single document ready for client review

- client reviewer assesses and corrects text as necessary

- LSP returns finalised text to client for final sign off

The problems with this approach include:

- opaqueness - lack of process transparency leaves clients in the dark on translation quality until it is (sometimes) too late

- inconsistency- consolidation is difficult, even when working from an existing termbase due to different styles and interpretations of translators

- lack of interaction - there is little if any direct interaction between client and translator

- too little too late – too little time and resource is allocated to document revision which means that finalising a file for say publication is squeezed into the end of translation project

- rapid incorporation of changes can be difficult to achieve without a centralised messaging platform

By using a virtual space the project overcame the traditional problems associated with dispersed teams working in isolation. Client can replicate their direct relationship with a translator through a mediated platform. Their anxiety over the quality of the final 'product' is lessened by their interaction with the actual translator working on their project and their ability to shape the translation as it progresses. Thus virtual spaces offer clear benefits to all parties involved: client, LSP and freelance translator.

4. Key findings and lessons learned

The project exemplifies an innovative approach to rapid translation of high volumes of specialised text supported by a virtual space. The key findings of the project case study were that virtual spaces can be a valuable tool for supporting global translation project management. Benefits included:

- increased buy-in: translators feel part of the team rather than hired hands

- interacting with the client review team from the project outset improves the translation/reviewer dynamic and reduces the likelihood of "not translated by us" syndrome

- a shared sense of responsibility for project success means that both the client and reviewer feel they play an important part in the translation process and achieving a successful project outcome

- reduces client anxiety over outsourcing their text to third parties - clients enjoy having direct access to translators

- translation can be faster – a centralised messaging system means communicating changes to terminology etc is faster and documented

- clear audit trail – sophisticated reporting mechanisms mean that all versions are stored and accessible online and who said what when is captured for later analysis.

Lessons learned

Using virtual spaces effectively is not as simple as setting up a hosted service and hoping for the best. Rather the level of transparency that typifies the majority of collaboration platforms means that client/LSP resource interaction must be carefully managed. Key lessons learned include:

- Ensure freelancers are fully briefed on how to interact with the client if that option is enabled. They represent the public face of your company even though they often 'guns for hire'. Ensure each freelance project resource undergoes a thorough induction in how to use the virtual space.

- Carefully manage what is posted online. Early drafts may be better managed offline rather than being posted for the client to see. Alternatively have a private 'sandbox' area on your

virtual space that will allow your internal resources to post and discuss early drafts. Collaboration spaces are like goldfish bowls where potentially everything is visible so manage permissioning (who can see/do what where and when) carefully.

- Ensure clients are full briefed on their roles and responsibilities on the translation project. There needs to be an informal service level agreement on how quickly client reviewers can respond to translators questions (typically 24hrs).

5. The future of global translation management and collaboration

Greater automation

It is clear that the trend towards increased automation of translation processes will continue unabated. While the holy grail of inputting complex source text, pressing a button and instantly receiving perfect target text will remain a dream for somewhat longer, it will not be long before companies with considerable translation volumes will insist on a level of automated translation in order to improve the three key criteria in the translation equation: cost, time and quality. While cost and time can be measured exactly, quality remains a subjective factor. This is likely to have an impact on how the key actors in the translation equation, clients, LSPs and translators, collaborate in the future in the following ways:

Greater openness and willingness to share translation assets.

As translation workflow and linguistic asset management become standard features, industries will collaborate on an agreed terminology and will be increasingly likely to share translation memories in order to reduce costs. It is likely that translation assets - translation memories and terminology – will be organised by industry domains rather than being limited by company boundaries. This will enable the quick assembly of unified linguistic databases for industrial domains. Clients may create industry specific virtual spaces for storing translation assets and making them available to translators et al.

Intelligent customers - Companies get smarter about content management

Companies will implement controlled language authoring, machine translation, XML based publishing and global workflow systems to improve the quality and speed of translation whilst lowering the costs. As companies collaborate on production so will they collaborate to reduce industry-wide translation costs. Expect the emergence of vertical translation organisations[1].

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[1] An example of this is the Translation Automation User Society (TAUS) whose members include companies such as Symantec, Auto-desk, EMC, Cisco, and Hewlett-Packard. TAUS members benchmark their translation processes and share lessons learned. See also Sun Systems use of Worldwide Globalization Centres (WGCs) http://developers.sun.com/global/technology/translation/

Social translation: the increased use of crowdsourcing

Wikipedia defines crowdsourcing as *"the act of taking a task traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people, in the form of an open call"*. In the context of translation of a website this means a client inviting its customers to offer translations of product collateral and content[2]

Mirroring the open source and creative commons philosophy some organisations, especially in the software development industry, will rely on external user communities to translate their software or catalogues. Francis Tsang, director of globalization at Adobe Systems Inc. recently stated that:

"Companies like Adobe and Sun Microsystems use naturally-emerging crowds with specialist knowledge about products who want more product content in their own languages. This way we can localize product-related content for languages which may not be high priority, but which nevertheless help grow our markets"[3].

The increasing use of the "wisdom of crowds" may see companies and organisations using making great use of machine translation supported by tightly controlled term bases and translation memories, and then refined by 'crowd translators'[4]. For an organisation such as the UN this might involve sending automatically translated texts for refinement via online communities of practice (e.g. UN internal translators). The question remains as to how to manage this process – marshalling the chatter of many individuals into a coherent viewpoint on how a particular sentience should be optimally translated. For the moment this would seem far more time-consuming and expensive in the long run than assigning the translation to a small translation team.

The Translator

The Translator is dead – Long live the Post Machine Translation editor

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[2] See Crowdsourcing Translation - http://www.iheni.com/crowdsourcing-translation/

[3] Crowdsourcing at Adobe - http://www.translationautomation.com/user-cases/crowdsourcing-at-adobe.html

[4] Facebook is another example of a technology company that used crowdsourcing to translate its graphical user interface into over six different languages

Whilst increased machine translation will reduce the time and cost of translation quality will still be judged in human terms. The future is likely to see the substitution of the traditional role of translator with the role of post machine translation (PMT) editor. Translations will be increasingly based on previous translations or assembled from previously translated segments which will allow rapid and cheap initial translation. The translation management software will automatically carry out quality assurance to check segment consistency and a final check will be carried by a native speaker to make minor adjustments to the text. Experienced PMT editors will develop a routine to identify and correct these mistakes quickly. This editing will be integrated into a translation project management virtual space or platform so that real-time editing of TM's feed through to a central repository that is accessible by other editors.

Greater use of virtual spaces. Clients will come to expect greater collaboration and transparency during complex translation projects. Clients want to reduce the feeling that outsourcing a translation project is like throwing a boomerang in the dark, by being able to shape the translation process throughout its lifecycle. There will thus be an increased demand for virtual spaces where client staff can interact directly with LSP resources.

6. Conclusion

The case study exemplifies an innovative approach to client-LSP collaboration that can improve translation quality. By using a virtual space translation both LSPs and their clients can benefit from:

- more efficient translation asset management – virtual spaces are an effective mechanism for securely sharing translation assets

- improved client relationship management

- reduction in client anxiety and fears over outsourcing translation projects

- faster translation – all parts of the translation are available to all members of the translation team in real time which allows for faster knowledge dissemination

- improved translation/reviewer dynamic - interacting with the client review team from the project outset improves the translation/reviewer dynamic and reduces the likelihood of "not translated by us" syndrome, which often occurs as a result of the sometimes competing agendas of in-house and external translators.