The Language of Change

A discussion of the emerging market for global translation and localization
David Stevens, Lernout & Hauspie Ltd

The global market for translation and localization has changed radically with the explosion of language-dependent high-tech products and services. The companies producing computer and telecommunications hardware and software, consumer electronics, multimedia entertainment, engineering products and Internet solutions need translators who know technical terms as well as languages. Marketers and brand managers up against the vagaries and complexities of foreign-culture markets need translation and localization service providers who understand those cultures and can advise them how to name and position a product within them.

A history of translation and localization

Until relatively recently, commercial document translation involved international business or legal documents. Native-speaking freelancers or employees of foreign organizations translated documents into necessary languages. Over time, a cottage industry emerged for these services, populated by almost 3,000 translation agencies specializing in one or more languages in the United States alone. However, with the explosion of language-dependent products and services, the nature of translation changed. Intense competition and the fast pace of high technology made specialized experience in the field essential.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the growth and profit potential in the translation market created an increasingly sophisticated industry with bigger players. It also lured companies from related industries into the arena. Print and publishing firms like R.R. Donnelly and Banta Corp. entered the translation and localization market through acquisitions of, or strategic alliances with, local translation companies. The move into translation seemed like a logical extension of their core competencies. These companies soon learned, however, that the businesses are vastly different. Today, the industry leaders have roots in the field, and offer a full range of services in a widening variety of languages.

Characteristics of the New Global Translation Market

Advances in translation technology are bringing new products and services to the market. The new breed of translation service providers that will excel in the field have honed technology that translates information on or via the Internet, where the number of users outside the United States will exceed Americans online by the year 2000. They have developed translation divisions that work with marketers and brand managers to properly introduce a company's products to foreign cultures. They play a crucial role for growth companies in information technology and other technical fields, where localization requires the kind of expertise that can write computer software code to support Korean characters without sacrificing processing speed. In addition, with technology companies expanding worldwide, never before has the demand been so acute for so much technical writing in so many languages.

The companies in this reborn translation market are becoming ever more important to global businesses that have come to depend upon them for support in order to succeed internationally. The industries that are growing most rapidly on a global level - information technology, multimedia entertainment, telecommunications, automotive, aerospace, the Internet and other technical fields – need this new translation market to continue to grow.

Computer-aided Translation

Advances such as computer-aided translation have given rise to new products and new translation methods. Automatic translation or machine translation (MT) converts one natural language into another language without human intervention. Machine translation mimics what a human translator does. It reads a sentence, "understands" it, and recreates it in another language so that the sentence conveys the same meaning. Automated translation can far exceed the average human translation rate of 2,500 words per day, and is considerably less expensive.

While human translation and editing remain the primary means of text translation because of accuracy, complex projects often employ translation tools - including machine translation and translation memory databases – as a crucial part of the process. These tools:

- save translation time;
- lower costs;
- enable a company to implement new product and market-specific terminology across industries and languages and
- ensure successful and consistent global corporate identity and product branding.

Advanced translation memory databases built on Linguistic Knowledge (LK)-based architectures prioritize the meaning of each sentence over the meaning of each word. Instead of translating documents laboriously word-for-word, these engines will generate a grammatical representation of the source sentence in the target language and translate accordingly. Draft translation engines also hold previously translated sentences in a databank. During a new translation session, each sentence is compared with those in the database to find a full or partial match. A human translator decides whether to accept or modify the proposed translation.

Machine translation is not perfect. Languages are complex, and words in many languages have multiple meanings. An established process called Controlled Language can enable consistency and greater conciseness across created documents. Controlled language naturally impacts positively on the machine translation process, by reducing terminology spread and increasing automatic accuracy. Recently commercialized tools such as the Boeing AECMA Simplified English Checker now allow texts to be analyzed for grammar against specific rules and dictionaries. Whilst the aerospace industry typically avoids large scale translation of aircraft maintenance manuals, tools such as this can help the process when required, and most importantly can be modified across industry in order to assist in driving down overall translation costs.

Machine translation does, despite its imperfections, provide fast, automatic translation ideal for high-quality drafts. It can also provide a good summary of a text's general scope. Such a feature is useful in sifting through Web sites in other languages, for example.

Translation on the Web

The Internet's growth will inevitably include more and more material in languages other than English. Already, valuable information in Japanese, French and German languishes beyond the grasp of most English-speaking users. Conversely, since the majority of the Web is in English, much of the world can't utilize it.

A machine translation feature on a browser such as the one developed by L&H's Language Division can determine the likely value of each summarized Web site so the user can decide which might be worth a more thorough translation. L&H's machine translation (with human post-editing assistance, if needed) can automatically translate on-line and Web-based documents. Such tools are becoming increasingly indispensable as the Internet truly becomes a worldwide medium for information and exchange across cultural boundaries.

Translation Services

Specialized service providers such as L&H's Consulting & Services Division are using a combination of human and machine resources to serve the application, technical language, and information technology markets. Translation services in information technology and similar markets typically involve:

Information technology, engineering, medicine, psychology and other scientific disciplines each have a specialized vocabulary or lexicon of terms. The use of specialized vocabulary in these industries has spawned a huge demand for terminology creation and management services that can create, store and broker this terminology. Leading localization and translation providers maintain terminology databases to supply clients with needed glossaries, lexicons and material for key word applications as well as to facilitate human and mechanical translation. These databases enable companies to implement market-specific terminology across industries and languages.

Massive technical documents also require sophisticated translation services. Marketers have discovered that these documents must be tailored very specifically to accommodate cultural idioms and perspectives. Translators of these documents – such

as user and reference manuals hundreds of pages long – need to understand native language and culture as well as technical terms.

Localization services tailor products to a local market. Localization is key for the information technology industry, since users must interact with the product (a computer, for instance) constantly and directly, using language and icons with which they must be familiar. To localize a product at the user interface involves not only literal translation of texts and modified graphic design, but information's format and content as well. In information technology, it can apply to software, multimedia titles or the Web.

Next phase translation

Many perceive globalization as a competitive advantage, and localization is its necessary corollary, as well as a strategic management challenge. Multilingual knowledge management skills are increasingly in demand as intra-company communications increase worldwide via a fast-growing international Internet.

The companies bound to succeed in the multilingual translation technology industry appear to be translation solution providers with an undiluted focus on core services in translation. They must maintain global operations skilled in serving key markets, including highly technical fields such as computer software and hardware, consumer electronics, automotive, aerospace and telecommunications.

Business' drive toward internationalization is bringing with it a corresponding industry dedicated to making business work at the linguistic level first. Many of the businesses driving globalization are highly technical ones, for which accurate translation and localization of products are essential, and this market is growing. Only the most experienced and constantly innovative of this new breed will flourish on a global scale.