CD-ROM: what can it offer the translator?

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are sitting at your word processor, typing in a translation, and wish to check a word. With a single key stroke you can view up to four dictionaries at once, type in the word you wish to translate in either language, display alternative translations and meanings, highlight the word or words you wish to transport across to your word processed text, and do so with a final keystroke. This can happen if your microcomputer is linked to a CD-ROM player holding a multilingual dictionary.

This paper offers a non-technical introduction to CD-ROMs in the context of the work of the translator. It is a new industry aimed directly at the user rather than the computer expert, and you have the chance to influence what products become available in your particular market sector.

WHAT IS CD-ROM?

A CD-ROM (Compact Disc Read Only Memory) is a 5" disc which looks exactly like a music CD, but which has permanently encoded information in digital form, representing text, graphics, images or data, almost perfect in terms of accuracy. The CD-ROM is created from a magnetic tape (mastering) after which copies can be produced very cheaply for easy distribution. The surface is protected by a transparent layer and is very durable. The data is read by laser, so it does not wear out.

Up to 600Mb of data can be stored on a single CD, so a typical product will contain over 500 million characters of information, equivalent to 270,000 single-

spaced A4 pages or 450 full length novels. Double density CDs are already promised, and x 10 density are under development. The data is indexed so that it can be searched and retrieved easily using specially designed software, normally included on the CD-ROM. The CD will be supplied with a floppy disk to allow you to install a CD-ROM for the particular CD player you have. Microsoft Corporation have developed a low cost program, Microsoft Extensions ©, which, if installed on your hard disk, makes this process fairly straightforward.

WHAT EQUIPMENT IS NEEDED?

Most CD-ROM products are designed for an IBM or compatible PC, but some are now available for the Apple Macintosh range of microcomputers. At least 640K of memory is required, but a hard disk is becoming essential, plus a floppy disk drive. A colour monitor, preferably with high resolution graphics (EGA or VGA), gives better quality display of the software capabilities. The CD-ROM drive plus interface may be external, but it is now possible to buy PCs with built in CD-ROM drives and an internal hard disk. A printer is highly desirable, but data can also be downloaded to floppy disk.

COSTS

In addition to the microcomputer hardware which it is assumed you would already have for word processing, a CD-ROM drive and interface might cost around £600 (having fallen from around £1,500 in two years), plus additional costs to upgrade the monitor if required. CD-ROMs vary widely, but the cost of products aimed at the translator averages £600, as outlined later.

ADVANTAGES

CD-ROM is *interactive,* allowing you to look up words, phrases or word stems and display meanings on the screen very quickly. Most products are extremely *user friendly,* using colour displays to help distinguish results from system messages, and giving instructions on every screen to help you move on through the database. Most have context-specific help – the program recognises which stage you are at in your search, so that calling up a HELP screen should explain precisely what to do next. (Some products are better than others!) The information is *browsable,* much as a hard copy dictionary would be, but you can jump around more easily. You can also *compare meanings* where more than one dictionary is stored on a CD. The *cost* of producing updates of CD products is much less than printing hard copies, although they are both produced from the same machine readable format.   Unlike data on floppy or hard disk, CD-ROMs

cannot be erased accidentally. There is also an unofficial but widely recognised *standard* for the method of storing data on CD (the High Sierra standard, named after the American hotel where representatives met from Sony, Hitachi, Philips and other leaders in the field). This should ensure that the equipment you buy today will not immediately become obsolete.

WHAT PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE?

There are now over 300 products available, and the range is expanding rapidly. Most of the early CD-ROMs contained copies of popular online bibliographic databases like Medline, the online version of the Index Medicus service from the US National Library of Medicine. Major library catalogues are also becoming available, so that access and expertise have quickly built up within the library profession. However, the products are essentially designed for 'end-users' rather than the librarian/intermediary, and more directories, dictionaries and other full text databases are now appearing. The medium was originally seen as best suited to less volatile data like encyclopaedias and other standard reference books that did not need constant updating, but the rapid decrease in production costs allows weekly updates if users are prepared to pay. Those in the financial business world are! Costs in the language field are much more modest. We shall concentrate on three demonstrated at this conference by the distributors, MultiLingua.

Harraps Multilingual Dictionary

The latest version has 13 bilingual dictionaries representing five million words in eight languages. The next version will have 14 languages. It includes *Harrap's shorter French dictionary,* but not all the products are from the Harrap Publishing House, and include products from Germany, Spain and Japan. This is an interesting concept – one publisher acting as agent for a number of others, producing a single product for the user. It is technically possible to translate between German and Japanese via the English translation, giving '56 dictionaries' but this may give some interesting results! The biggest advantage seems to be the ability to display up to four meanings of a word from different bilingual dictionaries on the screen at once. The CD-ROM works from within your word processing program, allowing easy transfer of words or phrases into your text merely by highlighting them on the screen when using the CD.

The cost is currently £595 + VAT, with a special educational discounted price of £695 which includes the CD-ROM player.

TERMDOK Multilingual Technical Termbank

This comprises seven terminology databases, produced by the Swedish Centre for Technical Terminology, but incorporating databases from France, Canada,

Norway and Sweden. Users can use the databases singly, all together or select their own combination. It is already in its second edition.

The cost is currently £660 + VAT (educational rates available).

Microsoft Bookshelf

This is a good example of the kind of packaging already referred to – 10 standard reference books on CD – dictionaries, an almanac, concise encyclopaedia, etc. It has an American bias at present, but a version aimed at the UK market is promised. Cost: £245 + VAT

It is worth stressing again that the market for CD-ROM is currently small, so that potential users are in a position to influence the type of products that might become available within a particular sector. The high international attendance at this conference would suggest an influential role for the two organising bodies on behalf of you, the translators.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

WORMs (Write Once Read Many times) are already available for people to record data themselves but not edit it, and erasable CDs are on the horizon. The data must, of course, be indexed to make it searchable with appropriate software. The most exciting prospect for those in the language field would seem to be multimedia, particularly for those also involved in language teaching. CD-Video is already available, linking high quality sound on CD to images on video in the music industry. Improvements in the ability of computer monitors to display television-quality pictures supports the development of CD-Interactive, integrating text, graphics sound and images, stored on CD but displayed via the computer, with the ability to use sophisticated search techniques. The potential for interactive learning programmes, particularly in language where sound is important, is immense. They may even allow this monolinguist to address you in German in five years' time!