Translation and technology: is it a jungle?

Does technology make globalisation more complicated? In a sector where demand constantly exceeds supply, and time frames continue to shrink at a terrifying speed, it might help to take a closer look at the globalisation actors: the decision-makers at the various stages, those involved in the creation of original texts, through translation, review and publishing without forgetting the tool vendors. Perhaps it is precisely because of the traditional approach to writing, translation and publishing that progress is so haphazard, disjointed and slow. I have no doubt that technology can make globalisation more efficient and less complicated. But how do we get from the jungle through the maze to the motorway.

A clear overall view of all the crucial aspects involved in the globalisation process is essential when deciding priorities and setting up an efficient workflow. These decisions are generally taken on the basis of overriding time and cost requirements and within these constraints the overall picture tends to get lost. Whether it is a question of a new product that requires collateral documents, for marketing, production, documentation and customer support in one or more languages, or new markets to be penetrated, traditionally the various departments involved, whether in-house or external rarely "communicate" with one another. The documentation department will have "parts lists" to accompany the technical description of the various components of a product, but these lists are often very varied, in dialect or jargon. Certainly they are not considered by anyone to be a list of definitive terms that should be adhered to in all references to the said parts.

Then again content creation is driven by market and regulatory requirements and there have been considerable changes in these requirements over the last fifteen years. This affects all companies competing on global markets and therefore creating content for various purposes and channels. For years wordsmiths have created content in different Desktop Publishing environments with little thought to economic considerations: the quantities involved, consistency let alone corporate standards or terminology, reuse in different contexts. They are also generally unaware of the problems related to internationalisation. IBM and Caterpillar pioneered the introduction of systems to resolve the problems and cost of their enormous volumes of technical documentation with alternating results. They understood the importance of standardising authoring practices and terminology to improve reuse of content and reduce the cost of translation. They introduced Simplified English and IBM Translation Manager to deal with authoring and recycling translations.

Today, the importance of branding, the multitude of markets and the spiralling of customer support costs should lead more and more companies to realise that it is no longer possible to leave the

various departments such as marketing, software development, documentation, after sales and spare parts in their separate silos. The costs in terms of company image, time to market, customer support and mere comprehension are too high. Technology is already part of the problem. It is imperative to harmonise the content in the platforms used to communicate, to clear the jungle and start cultivating content on an industrial level. The magic word Content Management (CM)!

But what many fail to realise is the overriding importance of placing terminology centre-stage when improving the quality of the source material for machine or computer assisted translation. Too often terminology is considered as a language after-thought, linked to translation, and thus unrelated to content creation. Furthermore, many wordsmiths are hostile to the adoption of aids designed to harness and even curb their creativity. They may also fear that recycling content will make them redundant. Not only do they fail to appreciate the costs of out-of-synch communication, or inconsistent terminology, but also that time frames have changed radically and that the only way to meet deadlines is to exploit all the aids that technology can provide. Thus the adoption of authoring systems and content management is a top-down decision, taken by those who have a clearer view of the overall company strategy but are maybe less familiar with all the issues involved and therefore perhaps not in the best position to assess the various options proposed. They think they are dealing with clearing a jungle and building a motorway but there are still a lot of uncharted areas.

Where used wisely technological processes has positive effects on costs and quality. But, terminology work is expensive and the returns not always immediately perceived and thus this investment is often postponed to some future date. This mines the validity of content right from the start. Unfortunately, CM and Translation memory (TM) systems are not accompanied by hazard warnings, quite the contrary. Then again, most people are unaware of the difference between Machine Translation (MT) and TM or that the latter needs to be used by experts otherwise the dangers of recycling garbage and the costs of fixing errors and inconsistencies are considerable.

Indeed there are serious misconceptions and false expectations that continue to surround MT and TM even in the translation world. Downstream, in another part of the jungle, due to lack of forethought in the creation stage as well as the often haphazard imposition of a variety of translation tools, the efficiency and savings which can be obtained in the production of translations is reaching its limits. Here, despite all the fanfare surrounding the TMS motorways, the jungle is still quite thick. On the demand side, both internet and the rapid increase in the number of language combinations requested as well as the quantity of material and the variety of approaches, including auctions and crowd-sourcing, are additional factors which create cacophony. The traditional chasm, consisting of lack of comprehension and communication, between content creators and translators

is still profound. Often this is bridged by translation companies not always fully aware of all these problems or sufficiently familiar with the customer's requirements and/or TM systems in general. On the other hand, these companies may also try and exploit their position vis a vis the customer and/or impose a particular translation environment on translators without sufficient investment or support. Most of them know they are dealing with a jungle/maze, but although some believe that they are already on the motorway, and others aim to reach it soon, yet others are frightened by the prospect.

On the other hand translators are not at all attracted by the motorway. In their individual silos, they are quite accustomed to their maze. They are not overly concerned about what lies upstream and downstream. Or if they are, the often insurmountable difficulties in communicating doubts and receiving replies to clarify the problems they encounter during translation, or feedback following a project are disheartening. The majority, like wordsmiths, prefer to cultivate a familiar garden/maze, e.g. Microsoft Word, equipped with spell checker, thesaurus and glossaries in tabular form, maybe some macros or even some Word-based translation tool. Surprisingly few are aware of, or see the need to spend money on, professional software. Even those who are may feel discouraged or de-responsibilised by the number PDFs they get asked to translate! Many are slow to realise the implications of the fact that Microsoft Word changes at regular intervals, or that their versions are not fully compatible with all their customers. The fact that documents have also become more complex and much heavier with the advent of digital photography is however probably causing them problems. Increasingly the content or types of documents to be translated can no longer be handled in this way. But it would be absurd to expect a translator to have access to, or even know how to use, all the software in which content is created. It would also be costly and very inefficient. But digging-in in a garden/maze when the surrounding jungle is changing and expanding so fast is also unthinkable. So technology is knocking on the door.

One aspect often forgotten is also one of the reasons for the development of TM tools, i.e. so that the translator can be independent of the "content-creation environment" and work in a specific "translation environment". This often escapes translators who are afraid of being made redundant by technology and are jealous of their liberty to "interpret" content. They reject the idea of "filling in the gaps". It should be remembered that translators are generally freelancers and the extreme fragmentation of the sector makes it hard for them to realise that they are in effect in very short supply. That not only is there no time to continue in the traditional manner, but that this is no longer economically acceptable. Thus, although it may be hard to plan changing one's way of working in the absence of an overall vision of how demand and content itself is shifting, a common attitude "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" is both sad and exasperating because technology can help a translator

improve both quality and efficiency without an excessive investment in software and training. It is also not a professional approach. The fundamental problem is that it is not easy for anyone to find objective advice on the most suitable software for particular requirements and thus the adoption of translation tools is frequently experienced as an imposition on the part of the customer with the sole aim of further exploiting the translator.

This attitude is perpetuated by the professional bodies who fail to keep abreast of the situation and provide information and training on basic tools and methods to help their members keep pace with the rapidly changing situation. TM technology if often despised when not deplored, and little is done to pursue the latest information on aids to help during the translation process. An ongoing thorough and accurate analysis and comparison of the technological aids available for professionals and their practical application should be part of the service offered to the members of professional associations and should also stimulate a more widespread and knowledgeable debate. A more pervasive adoption of blogs and wikis could help here.

A similar criticism can be levelled at the universities where the training of tomorrow's translators often includes little or no technological preparation. Indeed, here again technology tends to be despised, alien to academic life, at most an optional course or relegated to learning on the job, after graduation. But where else if not in further education should students be exposed to the wide range of technological options available and learn to experiment and develop an discerning approach that will help them identify and assess the most useful tools to aid them in their future profession? This practical preparation would be worth much more than the occasional Certification course and would equip teachers and students alike to take an active part in the debate alongside the other players. Indeed they could stimulate this debate and should provide a much needed unbiased approach.

Thus practically the only information widely available is provided by those tool vendors who spend the most on marketing. The largest, brightest, showiest flowers in the jungle. This raises the complex question of who the tools are designed for, since although it should be assumed that translation environment tools are designed for translators, this is perhaps not always the full story. While many tools struggle to be as translator-friendly as possible this is not always easy. Needs vary and not everyone expresses their preferences, but this may also prove to be too narrow an approach. So a great deal depends on what the tool vendor considers to be the most important requirements, the most important clients, perhaps just those who make the most stringent demands. Alongside this, attempts to widen the adoption of standards such as TMX, TBX, SBX, XLIFF to ensure a minimum of intercompatibility are sometimes frustrated by attempts to defend market shares on the part of those who preferring the jungle to the maze. Here again lack of communication may play an

important role. When communication is exclusively one-way, due to failure to listen on the one hand and inability to make oneself heard on the other. So technology is not sufficient to clear the jungle.

This is highlighted in yet another jungle "clearing", occupied by perhaps the most neglected participants in the translation process, the reviewers. Despite the increased focus on quality, certification and standards, and although the use of the recently developed QA tools can significantly reduce the number of problems in a translation, the case of the reviewers continues to be uncomfortable. First of all those called upon to review translations are often untrained, reluctant to perform this task, generally considered as a distasteful, unpredictable, extra duty/request in an already full working day. Secondly the tools available for this task are generally inadequate. Inserting notes in a PDF file, correcting MS Word files in revision-mode, or documenting the changes/corrections required in a Word file or email with the necessary references to facilitate the identification of the appropriate sections is not easy and prone to error at all stages. Thus any tools that can facilitate the review process and provide the means for communicating doubts and suggestions "in context" between the translator and the reviewer are a considerable step forward.

My thesis is that, although currently translation technology does still represent a jungle for the translation process and all those involved, this should not be the case. I believe that the problem can and should be tackled at all levels by promoting and improving knowledge and communication. It is ironic in a sector which entirely based on the need to promote and improve communication that we have lost ourselves in this tangle. Clearly, authors, translators and reviewers should be able to work in appropriate environments for their specific tasks, and these should include an organised flow of information throughout the process, in both directions. But who decides what the appropriate environment should be? Who decides if and how it can be improved? Who communicates that it exists and how it can be used?

It is necessary to find some way of collecting all the information, examining it with care and making it available at an authoritative level. It is not just a question of identifying the tools, but knowing which to use as well as how to use and combine them, and facilitate and promote feedback, to reap the benefits and gain the confidence and cooperation of all those involved. We should remember that technology can and should make authors, translators and reviewers much more efficient and improve the quality of the entire process. In this extremely complex and variegated situation, perhaps it is time to establish some kind of authority to analyse all the requirements and solutions in an objective manner and offer all the actors involved disinterested advice about what processes and technology can facilitate their work. What role and responsibility can be attributed to the universities or to other international bodies such as EU or UN? Although it might be argued by some

that the latter have a vested interest in this debate, as two of the largest investors in translations, I think that the time has come to reply loud and clear: we all have a vested interest but that is not a good reason to hide in the jungle.