Translators on translation memories: a blessing or a curse?

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Abstract. *Now a standard feature in the translator's toolbox, translation memory (TM) technologies come with various prices and brands, and hence different learning curves and levels of customer service. A study of messages posted to Lantra-L, an online forum for translators, reveals the advantages and disadvantages involved. Lantra-L contributors often mention gains in productivity due to repetitive texts as a key advantage, even if this has also led clients and translation agencies to seek discounts for perfect and near matches. Despite this drawback, non-repetitive texts and terminology management can also benefit from translation memories. Translators could explore opportunities for using TMs with non-repetitive texts, as this is something that neither agencies nor clients have system-atically taxed yet.*

"Question to those who actually use translation tools: could you explain in a few words what you actually gain by using them?" (6 March 2003 16:10)

The question above was pasted to the Lantra-L discussion list from EST-training, a list the contributor defined as for "academic teachers, at best moonlighting as translators".[1] It generated the short thread on Lantra-L titled "Translation Memory software +&-". Increased productivity was the highlight among the pros, with fee discounts for repetitions the main feature among the cons. This is one of the issues the Lantra-L list deals with many times and which academic and professional literature tends to ignore (an interesting exception being Rode 2000), so it is informative to take a step back to show how it is being answered—which we will do here for the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2003.

The question could not have been posted to a better forum. Lantra-L is the oldest and one of the most active and prestigious lists for translators. It

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[1] Research on the same list and for the same period but focusing on how users thought of *specific* TM systems, not of TM in general, has been published in García (2003).

avoids the narrow specialization of specific brand users' lists while still maintaining a focus on computer-aided translation that tends to be lacking in other lists based on country, language or area of specialization. This is a fact that Lantra-L's own membership is not shy in acknowledging: "I mean, who knows more [about TM] than the translators on our list? And I don't mean that tongue in cheek" (29 Jul 2002 11:25).

Using the search facility at the Lantra-L archives, we sought content-rich messages hit by major brand names (Trados, DéjàVu, Wordfast, Transit, SDLX, Trans Suite 2000, Wordfisher, Metatexis, Multitrans and Logiterm, i.e. those having users' lists at Yahoo! Groups). This gave us instant access to the contributions of some 134 translators, some of them experienced users of one or more brands, others complete beginners. Translation memory (TM) is often presented there as a blessing for the profession, other times as a curse, with four different patterns on this see-saw emerging:

1. As a curse: based on a deep feeling of frustration in many translators— mainly, but not only, beginners—due to the perceived steep learning curve needed to master TM;
2. As a blessing: based on a feeling of euphoria in others—mainly experienced translators, dealing with repetitive texts—due to gains in productivity;
3. As a curse: when after a significant investment in money, time and effort, and once having mastered the software, gains in productivity are offset by agency policies on "discounts" for perfect and fuzzy matching; and, then again
4. As a blessing: on the realization that the investment may pay off for non-repetitive text as well.

Learning curve

In the 1980s, TM technologies were confined to the in-house translation departments of corporations and big agencies. Since the late 1990s they have reached the freelance community. Clients and agencies request translators to use TM software. Many translators have had no choice but to embrace a technology they were not prepared for. There is a view at Lantra-L that sees TM software as difficult to master mainly, but not only, in the initial stages.

The first hurdle is to realize what the technology is for. While everyone seems familiar with machine translation (MT), there would always be some newbie at Lantra with no idea of what doing a job "with Trados" involves. "Could you please explain to me briefly how Trados works for example, does it translate word to word?", someone asks on 4 Jan 2003 13:31. By the time they find out, the opportunity has probably been lost.

Then comes price, which covers the full range, from very expensive down to budget brands and freeware. Differences in price usually relate to

differences in functions, filters, stability, amount of flow that can be simultaneously handled, and other variables. Lack of information will make translators eager to buy expensive tools without a proper assessment of their needs. Alternatively, they may expect too much from free applications.

Which brand to choose will depend on which kind of software a particular translator feels comfortable working with. There are basically two approaches to TM, best exemplified by major brands, Trados and DéjàVu. Trados is Word-based; DéjàVu relies on a proprietary interface. Many consider getting used to DéjàVu a disadvantage because it takes a while (the same would apply to the other brands in this category, such as Transit, and SDLX). At the same time, others consider the interface to be DéjàVu's best asset since, once you are familiar with it, you can deal with all formats in the same environment. Word-based software (Trados, Wordfast, Wordfisher, etc.), although easier to use at first, becomes complicated when translators need to deal with non-Word files.

The more functions, filters, and tools in the box, the more difficult certain TMs may be to master, but getting to know the ins and outs of a program is the most daunting aspect. What really bothers translators, even experienced ones, is the fact that the software reacts differently in different environments, depending on which hardware is used, which programs run in the background, which languages are in play, and how the source file has been handled. These are the problems that the users' lists are all about. They come when least expected and, if compounded with a tight deadline, they could indeed "drive sane translators to drink" (12 Feb 2003 13:16):

> "Tearing my hair out" (11 Jul 2002 14:29)

> "Frustrated and considering going for a walk despite a deadline" (3 Oct 2002 14:33)

> "I came VERY CLOSE to throwing it all out the window (laptop incl.) out of sheer frustration." (13 Mar 2003 00:31)

> "... nothing seems to make sense in this software. Weird, and frustrating." (3 May 2003 00:26)

Here is where, if help from the users' lists is not forthcoming rapidly enough, client support comes into the picture. Comments regarding service by the two main brands abound at Lantra-L while, surprisingly, little information is offered on the other ones. For this period 2002-2003 DéjàVu had a much better reputation for service than did Trados.

The late Emilio Benito, the developer of DéjàVu, earned that reputation. On 10 Mar 2003 07:08 someone explained how a problem—inability to export the files—was fixed personally by Benito, who sent back the exported files "in a message at 3:05". Even DéjàVu opponents are in awe:

Emilio seems to either be a superman or have a time machine that gives him 48 hours in a day—I am really in awe (and I am not being facetious). But he really is an exception. What happens when he decides enough is enough and he needs more time for himself? Is there anyone else at Atril willing to put in the hours and obvious commitment he has to his product's users? (30 Aug 2002 09:12)

Trados's service has traditionally been seen as poor:

I'm sure someone will say [Trados] support would help, but they don't. First of all, you have to pay for support, but even worse, they don't even respond. They have only ever answered one of my questions and it took two weeks before they told me I should check the knowledge base. Duuuuhhhhh! Do they really think I did nothing in all that time? (29 Aug 2002 08:57)

However, this long-held perception at Lantra-L seems to have started to change:

I have had very good levels of support from Trados Ireland... despite not having a Trados maintenance contract (30 Aug 2002 09:22)

When I have phoned [Stuggart's office], they have commented that I really should think about getting a contract if I use TWB a lot. The have _never_ refused to help because I don't have one (30 Aug 2002 11:45).

Summarizing the advice given at Lantra-L on how to minimize risks when adopting TM: read what expert users think, assess your needs, narrow your choices and download the demos before making your decision. Then, "be cautious about juggling learning all about it and a tight deadline" (17 Apr 2003 14:56). It may not be an easy ride, but the consensus is that the investment will pay off.

Gains in productivity

Once the TM program has been set up and is responding, the legacy material aligned and imported to the memory database, the memory itself built up with new translations, strategies for troubleshooting acquired, and clients attracted by virtue of using TM, then TM becomes a companion the translator will never go to work without:

Don't wait; every day without it is a waiste [sic] (12 Jul 2002 21:11)

My Deja vu paid itself [sic] in one week (29 Jul 2002 22:37)

> An Excel file arrived ... The job would have been virtually impossible without DéjàVu ... The turnaround was a couple of hours, and the agency was very impressed. (12 Aug 2002 14:35)

> I create a project, import a document and for the **vast** majority of cases pretranslating give [sic] me 100% matches for anywhere from 30-50% of the text. Time and time again. Day in and day out. (5 Jan 2003 07:47)

> I'm working on two school handbooks ... From 9:00 to 2:00, 13,000 Words translated. Feels good. Thanks to WordFast. (20 Jun 2003 14:08).

These are the advantages often mentioned in the list: TM is best for repetitive texts—manuals with a lot of internal repetition, for example—and updates; the longer a translator works with TM, the more helpful it becomes; translation is more consistent within the document, and through work on the same subject; terms that have taken ages to research will always be ready for reuse; agency-specific vocabulary ("if agency A likes to call a word X and agency B wants the same word translated as Y") can be easily applied; dealing with unfamiliar files (Excel, PowerPoint, PageMaker and other DTP applications, html and xml) can become a breeze if filters are available; it is a great help to the translator's memory when expressions, easily remembered at the beginning of a session, become blurry after a few hours or days.

Here are some contributors' views on what translators gain from TM software:

> [it] gives you an extra hour or two of premium translation time a day. Like a strong tail wind helping you cycle uphill (5 Jan 2003 14:05);

> [With TM] I think I win because I work less, and my clients win because they get better work for the same price (6 Mar 2003 16:20).

Is such enthusiasm warranted?

"Trados discounts"

"This morning I received a 3,000-word order accompanied by a Trados analysis that purported to show that, because of repetitions, there were in reality only 1,200 words to be translated" (25 Oct 2002 11:13). For big, repetitive jobs, the use of TM software is required, but the gains then have to be shared with the client: "It is already happening ... For large, repetitive jobs, clients now want and get 'Trados discounts'" (7 Mar 2003 07:19). If clients provide the translator with translation memory and terminology, they will seek to pay less for repetitions, even though the translator will still need

to handle them, and some perfect matches will have to be adjusted given changes in context:

> A translator colleague of mine, who works a lot with TRADOS, gave me the following rule of thumb for repetitions: 100%: 10%, 95-99%: 25%, |85-94%: 50%, from "no match" to 84: 100% (6 Mar 2003 17:54).

Some translators would not like to hear about discounts at all:

> when a client suggests that there should be a discount for similar-to-identical terminology, i tell them i really would prefer an extra 10% instead for the extra work of making sure that 'near matches' are not mistranslated (6 Mar 2003 16:05).

Some translators who conceded discounts later regretted it:

> first and LAST time I'll ever give discounts for repetitions... (17 Apr 2003 14:56).

For most, "near matches" are a fact. The issue of the quality of the memories received seems irrelevant. If not accepted, if translators insist on considering as repetitions only the exact matches of their own memory for that specific client, then they will price themselves out of the market:

> I told the client that I wouldn't do any more work on the project unless they 1) considered as repetitions only items from MY memory (not any other translator) and 2) paid a minimum fee for each file to compensate for handling time. That made me too expensive, apparently. (17 Apr 2003 14:56)

The perception is that "self-employed translators, in general, have very little leeway for negotiation... unless they are highly specialized" (6 Mar 2003 17:54).

There may be an area, however, in which clients and agencies have not yet been able to systematically tax translators, and in which translators may be able to put their mastery of TM to good use: that of the translation of non-repetitive text.

Non-repetitive text

General wisdom assumes that TM is only useful for repetitive texts and updates, and when dealing with fancy formatting and exotic files. However, a body of thought seems to be emerging at Lantra-L to show that plain, non-repetitive text may benefit from it as well:

> i rarely translate repetitive texts, but i focus heavily on the same subjects, with the same clients ... having that terminology for the balance sheet and income statement and cash flow available makes it all go more accurately and efficiently. (6 Mar 2003 16:05)

> i only work with non-repetitive segments. i wouldn't leave home without it [TM]. (20 Mar 2003 05:50).

Two distinctive approaches to the handling of non-repetitive texts through TM seem to be developing: one is based on the DéjàVu "assemble" feature; the other is not.

The "assemble" feature allows the translator to retrieve from the database not only sentences (exact and fuzzy) and terms—which most TM applications do—but also phrases, sub-sentence items, "portions" in DéjàVu-speak. Trados or Wordfast can also do that through their concordance function but the translators have to ask for it, should they have this déjà vu feeling that they have translated it before. The specificity of DéjàVu is its ability to leverage these "fuzzy" portions automatically. Portions can then be put together with a few keystrokes or mouse clicks. This has sometimes been referred to in the DéjàVu literature as the incorporation of example-based machine translation (EBMT) into TM. Here is a typical testimonial:

> I am currently working on 10,000 words of appeal court hearings. There are 0 repeated sentences in these three files, but because I have the entire Civil Code of Québec in my database, DejaVu keeps inserting the terminology I have saved to my term base and portions of sentences from the memory. (20 Mar 2003 05:50)

Another user explains: "Sometimes it makes you feel like you're editing all the time instead of translating, but that can be a good thing!" Even if the portions are finally discarded, they could trigger the brain further. Some thought this feature helped quality even more than productivity: "Someone wrote on the DV list that he actually works more slowly using DV (!) but that the difference in quality is amazing and more than makes up for any time invested" (5 Jan 2003 13:11).

This is seen by some as "one of deja vu's major strengths—for the rest of us who don't do manuals" (29 Aug 2002 03:52). It is a strength recognized even outside the traditional DéjàVu camp at Lantra-L: "I generally prefer working in Trados, but like DV's sub-segment matching capabilities and use that for texts that will profit from it" (5 Jan 2003 13:48).

However, not all users of TM are happy with it for non-repetitive texts. What some would consider useful triggers, for others will be distracting options (and too much mouse work). For some, low-budget TM is useful enough. One user even considers it an advantage not to have fuzzy matching in her application. Without time for "DV humor", she praises Wordfisher as

"a good work tool for business letters, legal documents, news items, and the like—the kinds of non-repetitive texts most translators deal with" (20 March 2003 09:31). For her, Wordfisher offers as good a service as the expensive brands without the price tag. Wordfast has also satisfied users who do not do much repetitive text:

> I even ocr [sic] or retype my hardcopy docs (most of my work) not only to use Wordfast but also to be able to easily search for all contexts of a term and to more easily keep track of my notes. (I make up a separate notes file with the source text in one column of a table and notes in another column, sentence by sentence). (17 Apr 2003 14:56)

Yet for others, a strong vocabulary management is a must:

> I find it definitely pays to use Trados in this way even where there are no repetitions precisely because I can achieve consistency of terminology (17 Jan 2003 06:48).

Two Canadian brands, Multiterm and Logiterm, entered the market claiming the ability to put massive quantities of bilingual text together plus automatically extract the relevant terminology and phraseology. They were noticed at Lantra-L and gained mixed reviews (9 Jan 2003 09:26 and 24 Apr 2003 11:50).

A blessing and a curse

TM is the technology that has brought translation into the industrial age. Multilingual content, for decades a bottleneck in corporation workflows, can now be exploited through the reuse of past translations and the ability to share the task between many translators, speeding up work while reining in the costs. For repetitive texts, this advance is unstoppable. Freelance translators will not get the job without it.

Translators are thus investing heavily in TM, in terms of money, time and effort. The learning curve is steep. The investment would pay off handsomely if the benefits did not have to be shared with clients and agencies. Unfortunately, the feeling of exhilaration so many translators get once TM is mastered is short-lived. As it is put at Lantra-L, "the benefit of the new tool has shifted from downstream to upstream, just as it happened with other technologies before (fax, copier, PC)". The freelance translator "ends up with the disadvantages of being self-employed plus the disadvantages of being employed". Yet, there is still that use of TM for non-repetitive texts that agencies and clients are not systematically taxing.

All in all, TM is, as the previously quoted contributor would say, "Another case where the latest & greatest technology turned out to be different than imagined" (7 Mar 2003 07:19).

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