The Translator Workstation

by Dr. Alan K. Melby

WHAT IS THE TRANSLATOR WORKSTATION? It is a hardware-software system; it is a productivity tool. It will enhance the status of the translation profession. It will be used nearly everywhere translation is done, with or without machine translation. Its time has come.

Every profession has its particular skills, and most have specialized tools. High tech tools seem to raise the status of the skilled user (for example, a physician with a laser vs. an old-fashioned scalpel, an engineer with a CAD workstation vs. a drawing board, or an accountant with an electronic spreadsheet vs. a pencil and an adding machine).

The translator workstation can do the same for translators, and a translator can put one together now, in 1987.

First, as a hardware base, choose a microcomputer which is widely available, supports the character set(s) you need, allows you to attach a variety of storage media, and has the software you need. This probably means an IBM or compatible PC/XT/AT, or the Apple Macintosh Plus, SE or Mac II.

The basic (Level One) software components include: a multilingual word processor (possibly with spell checking, word counting, grammar checking, and synonym finding), a telecommunications program, and a multilingual terminology management program. The word processor should allow you to feed your draft translation into a desktop publishing system. Simply using a Level One workstation can result in significant productivity increases (up to 40 percent) with high quality output, especially as measured by consistent use of technical terminology.

Level One software is available in abundance. Word processors popular with US translators include WordPerfect, VolksWriter, and XYWrite III. Microsoft Word is very popular in Germany. Telecom software ranges from shareware like QModem and ProComm to high-end packages such as VTerm III, HyperAccess, and Relay Gold. Multilingual terminology management systems include ABC Word from ALP Systems, Profilex from Germany and Mercury/Termex from an obscure Utah company called LinguaTech.

If you have access to source texts in machine-readable form, then you may want additional (Level Two) software to process them. Level Two includes word lists, dynamic keyword-in-context displays, and text-related glossaries, but stops short of full sentence translations. Level Two tools allow a careful analysis of important texts, impractical in a manual environment.

Level Two packages are emerging. INK International has just announced its own Text Tools. ALP Systems has AutoTerm. More will come.

If you have access to a machine translation system, your workstation should include an interface to it (Level Three). Then you can post-edit the machine translation using the same Level One and Two tools you use for human translation, to avoid switching screens and keyboards (an ergonomic sin).

The evolution of the translator workstation is blurring the distinction between human translation and computer-assisted translation, as nearly all translation becomes computer-assisted. The first draft may be done by a human or a machine. If the translation is for distribution, it will probably be post-edited. The two extremes of careful human translation with human post-editing and indicative machine translation with no post-editing will both be found on the same workstation. The increasing world-wide demand for translation, especially good technical translation, and the current gap between AI and human intelligence (see Kobayashi's Dream in the first issue of LT) assure a continuing market for all combinations of human and machine-assisted translation through the end of the century.

Not all combinations of software work equally well. In selecting software, consider co-residency. If the terminology software is co-resident with the word processor, you can consult a dictionary or glossary whenever necessary, without shutting down the word processor, or loading the terminology software each time from disk. Fast, easy data transfer of selected translations into the word processor is also a time-saver. Co-residency, which can be attained with various software technologies (TSR, "switching," or an operating environment such as Microsoft Windows), is also useful for the telecom software, allowing electronic mail and database consultation without shutting down the word processing session.

And problems with simple solutions can't be ignored. For example, data captured from a telecom session should be run through a simple program to strip out any non-ASCII characters which may confuse the word processor. And traditional database managers which impose a fixed record-layout of fixed-length fields on every dictionary and glossary entry should be avoided now that more flexible packages, which we will call "structured text data managers," are becoming available.

While the technology will doubtless continue to evolve, all the essential components for a translator workstation are available now, so there is no reason to wait. Along with the productivity increase for the translator, there are at least two visible benefits for the client: increased consistency of terminology due to the rapid consultation of the client-specific terminology files; and decreased editing costs, since the document does not need to be re-typed and may even be camera-ready. Even if a portion of these benefits is passed back to the translator in the form of increased fees per word, the client's overall costs should decrease. Everyone wins. ●

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