

The Translation Memory Advantage

Building a translation database can save time and money

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Have you ever wished you could remember everything you've written over the past few years, and reuse it whenever needed? Now that would be a valuable, timesaving tool. In the same vein, it would be worth a great deal if a translator could recall every sentence translated for a client, and recycle it wherever appropriate.

Today there are tools that help translators do exactly that. These tools are programs, called translation memory software, which allow translators to store and retrieve text. Using this software saves time and money and contributes to a better translation.

Why is translation memory so important?

Many documents contain boilerplate information—material that is repeated verbatim in any number of different documents. If a company manufactures ten different models of the same type of machine, the user's manuals undoubtedly have material that is common to all. For example, the safety sections, service and support, and warranties may be virtually identical.

Unless your company has created modules for that information, it is presented for translation with each operator's manual and may be translated from scratch each time. It is difficult or impossible for translators to manually locate repeated text. Finding it is often as time-consuming and expensive as retranslating and there is always the danger of skimming over minor discrepancies.

That's where translation memory software shines. With the help of this software, the translated information is stored in a database for reuse. When a new document file is processed, the software identifies the repeats electronically.

What is translation memory software?

It is a unique type of software that works with text files and captures translation as the translator works with the source text. The software program stores the translated sentences with the source English.

Once the initial database is created, any new English text is compared to entries in the translation database to find and retrieve previously translated foreign language material. This eliminates the need for retranslation.

The program does not do translation; it is not generating "machine translation." Instead, this software captures quality translations done by a professional, human translator for reuse later.

Is it new?

Although translation memory databases are widely promoted today, the concept is not new. Some translation companies have been building databases and offering the savings to customers for years. But the introduction of commercial products has made this process widely accepted as a viable tool for more types of documents.

Where does this approach work best?

There are three basic requirements to maximize the benefits of translation memories:

1. Repetitive material. If your manuals have the same text repeated over and over again, building a database has much to offer. This repeat text does not have to be in complete sections, or even paragraphs. Translation memory software can recognize matching text segments no matter where they appear.

2. Useable electronic files. Electronic files are a must. Translation of hard copy documents can't be input into a database. Certain types of files can be used more easily than others. FrameMaker, Microsoft Word, Interleaf, SGML, HTML and XML files are a natural for this process. QuarkXPress, PageMaker, FreeHand and other layout program files may require additional manipulation—but don't count them out. CBT applications, software strings and Help files are also good candidates.

3. A significant amount of text in translation projects. If your documents contain few words—say 1,000 words or less—you won't see a lot of savings from this method. That's because the up-front work of preparing electronic files for translation offsets the advantage gained from translation memory. Translation customers with small documents such as 3- or 4-page instruction sheets may be disappointed if they anticipate a big discount. On the other hand, translation memories would really pay off for a customer with ten 50-page user manuals to translate in 6 languages.

What can you expect?

Many clients experience savings (actually cost avoidance) of 25%, 30%, and more. Your savings grow as the database builds. An additional benefit is that your in-country reviewers' preferences can be incorporated into the database so that future translation is consistent with their chosen terms.

One factor that affects your cost savings is the ease of processing your files. The fewer modifications needed to prepare your files for translation, the more savings will be realized. As discussed above, certain desktop publishing programs lend themselves naturally to this software, while others require more file manipulation before translation.

In addition, there may be adjustments that require manually editing the files before translation. For example, incorporating metric measurements can take quite a bit of time and undercut the savings to be realized from the database.

Can translation memory software work for you?

Working with a translator that uses translation memory software should be of interest to you if you translate more than just a few documents a year. In some cases, the inherent savings are sufficient to cause companies to change their publishing system or software. Switching to a program like FrameMaker may be worthwhile when you consider long-term savings.

Once you're working with a translator that uses translation memory software, remember not to make cosmetic changes to the text. (This may be difficult for the writer who is always trying to improve style.) Rearranging sentences or sections is fine. Editing or adding words without affecting the meaning is not. If you make a change such as taking out a few words, or substituting a different adjective, the sentence no longer matches what is stored in the database.

It's also not a good idea to change your in-country reviewers after establishing translation databases. A new contact overseas may introduce different terminology preferences, causing some of the database entries to be obsolete.

If my translator uses translation memory, do I have anything else to worry about?

This quick overview makes memory tools sound like a magic elixir. But keep in mind that running this software requires advanced language skills. There is an inherent danger in running memory software and automatically inserting translated sentences without approval by an experienced linguist.

Context is everything when it comes to translating into different languages. Each sentence must fit in context with the sentences that come before and after. If the context changes, a sentence that is a perfect match may need to be modified in order to preserve its meaning. Processing translation from a database and merging it with new translation requires the fluency and technical understanding that only experienced translators possess. Plus, no software is perfect and errors in retrieving translation from memory can happen.

Remember that a database is only as good as the data it contains. Professional, experienced translators who know and understand your product must first provide the translation that will serve as a basis for future work. A database of poor translation is worse than no database at all.