

Translation Tools Today: A Personal View

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What does the market offer to the professional translator these days? The arena has become so overcrowded with contenders and they are moving so fast, that even watching the major players has become quite a task. I have given up all hope of ever writing a full survey of the tools now available. However I believe I can shed some light on a few issues, mainly for the use of the bewildered many who feel they must acquire translation memory software and are lost in the maze of information.

Trados: Leader under Siege

Speak of translation tools for professional translators, and you must refer to Trados (www.trados.com), the world leader, the market standard, the program everybody knows, many love and many love to hate. There is a user list at tw_users@yahoo.com and the amount of Trados-bashing there is astonishing.

Why is Trados the world leader then?

First, make no mistake, it works and works well, mainly in the translation of Microsoft Word documents, which is what many of us translate all the time. Trados has many limitations, however. For instance, MultiTerm, the terminology management utility, is a Rube Goldbergian piece of software that requires no less than 12 steps to add a new term to a glossary, whereas most competing programs require only three. But you can set up Trados and begin to work in a short time and, because Trados uses the all-too-familiar Word interface, it looks a lot less frightening to the novice than other programs that use a proprietary interface.

Second, Trados caters for the specific needs of translation agencies and agencies often send vendors projects to be translated using Trados. Both DéjàVu and Wordfast can handle "Trados projects" perfectly well, but not all translators know that. So they buy Trados because that's what the agency wants.

Third, Trados has been there for a long time and although many criticize their marketing efforts, they have made their name a household word. In many cases, Trados is the only program a translator knows about—until after they buy it.

Trados 5 is sold in two flavors, FreeLance and Team, with different prices and capabilities. Unfortunately, Extraterm, the terminology extraction tool and the most important enticement to upgrading from version 3.x, is supplied with the Team

version only, something that made many freelance translators somewhat reluctant to upgrade, for the Team version is not exactly freelance priced.

However, make no mistake; the name of the game for other programs still is "beat Trados." How do other contenders play the game?

DéjàVu: the Powerhouse

Déjàvu, (www.atril.com) plays the game by offering a feature-laden program and unbelievably good service. Emilio Benito, the founder and chairman, is a member of the user list dejavu-l@yahoogroups.com (or dejavu-e@yahoogroups.com in Spanish) and seems to be on duty around the clock. Post a message to the list on a Sunday afternoon and chances are you will get an answer from him in less than 20 minutes. The competition usually does not work weekends.

DéjàVu can do unbelievable things and has several unique features—too many to describe here, regrettably. My favorite is autoassemble, a feature technically referred to as *shallow memory* that will pick up bits and pieces of information from several places and suggest a decent translation.

There are others. The Lexicon, for instance, an arcane feature that prepares a frequency list of all words and expressions used in a text and helps you prepare a glossary of most-frequently used terms. The lexicon—autoassemble combination is a power tool that puts DéjàVu in a class by itself.

The proprietary interface was designed for translators, not for writers, and people used to work with word processors will miss many features—but once you get used to it you will ask yourself how you could ever work using Word for Windows, for it offers many resources Word entirely lacks.

Because DV is not bound by the Word interface, it can handle many types of file without problem. No plug-ins, no plug-ons, no add-ins, no add-ons: just transparent filters. You always translate using the same interface and set of commands. And DV3 can deal with over 20 types of file, including, of course, the celebrated Trados pre-translated files so loved by agencies.

As I am writing this (and listening to old swing-band records, for a change) the user list is discussing the upgrade to DV4, which apparently will be called something else and will probably be released some time in late December or early January or some other time. Who knows—we've been waiting for DV4 for at least one year, but now it does seem to be on the verge of being released.

Don't dare buying translation memory software before downloading DV and giving it a good try.

Is the Trados Model Exhausted?

Every so often someone says DV is excellent but for the interface and suggest they adopt a more Trados-like look and feel. What they don't know is that early-early DV versions had a different, more Word-like interface. The interface was changed because the developer felt it hindered further development of the program.

If you use DV (or other programs using proprietary interfaces, such as SDLX or TRANS Suite, for that matter) you will soon notice that the Word interface, although very *simpático* to beginners, is really a hindrance. No way I can explain it here. You will have to trust me for that.

Also some translators with a technical turn of mind claim the Trados memory concept is also exhausted and that future versions won't bring many improvements. I don't know. I wish I did, but I am a simple working translator, not a programmer. Unfortunately.

Wordfast: the little engine that could

Yves Champollion, a strong critic of the Trados model and the creator of Wordfast (www.champollion.net) fights Trados with a program that, on the surface, is very much like Trados. Yves has a sharp tongue and can be very funny. His voluminous contributions to the Wordfast list (wordfast@yahogroups.com) are a precious source of information and amusement.

Contrary to other critics, Yves claims there is nothing wrong with using Word as the basis for a translation program. In a recent post he said something like deep down Word has it all and that if the surface commands are for writers (which they are) that does not mean a different set of translator-friendly commands can not be developed and included in a simple Word template.

He developed such a template and calls it Wordfast. Not really a program, mind you, there is no ".exe" file. Just a template. Run it and your Word will acquire a large number of new commands, commands that a pro can use to increase translation productivity and consistency. Amazing, let me tell you.

The databases are simple indexed text files and can be inspected using any text editor, contrary to the proprietary system used by Trados. Wordfast can also import databases in several formats—including Trados 3.x. Coincidentally, Trados 5.0 uses encrypted bases, which Wordfast can no longer import directly. However, Wordfast can handle the Trados files loved by agencies without problem.

Wordfast lacks several of the features that make DV so great and can handle only MSOffice files, but, nevertheless, it works exceedingly well.

Yves is a genius and has a dedicated following that tests his daily updates and translates manuals for free. Wordfast is still a bit buggy and is not recommended for the faint of heart. Also, it works better with Office 2000 and Windows ME or later.

At the present time, Wordfast is free, although registration is required. Recently Yves joined Logos, the translation agency, in a partnership for Wordfast. It is no secret that the utility will go "commercial" in January 2002. What will happen then? I don't know and Yves is not saying, although we keep asking.

So many people have downloaded the freebie Wordfast version in the recent past that it is difficult to see how they can find anyone ready to buy the commercial program in 2002. Yves assured users more than once that there is no "time-bomb" and that the current versions will work forever.

Many of the present users have bought Trados in the past (Wordfast is specially attractive to Trados-broken translators) and are not very likely to be interested in laying out more money for another translation utility. On the other hand, a 100% stable Wordfast would be a good investment, basically for those who make a point of having the celebrated Word interface before their eyes all the time.

We must wait and see.

Transit: the Giant that Took a Wrong Turn

It's a pity, really. Transit 2.7 (<http://www.star-group.net>) was such a great program. Lightning-fast and absolutely crash-proof. The manuals were absolutely inscrutable and read as if they had been written by Immanuel Kant on a bad day and the interface was exceedingly ugly. But once you got the hang of it, oh boy, did it run!

For reasons unknown to me, Star AG decided to launch version 3.0, an unfortunate, crash-prone horror that now, after God knows how many patches, seems to have acquired some measure of stability—when run under Windows 2000, that is. The expectation regarding version 3.0 was great, the outcry after it was released was even greater. Several people I know dropped their upgrades and ran back to the old trusted 2.7. The user list (transit_termstar@yahoo.com) is moribund, users discouraged.

Instead of a translation memory database, Transit uses an interesting system of reference files that allows you to base each translation on a number of old translations selected for the purpose. This is a definite advantage, but the downside is that you must keep tabs on your reference files, not an easy task for those people like me who lose stuff quicker than they can find them. In addition, unlike DV and Wordfast, it cannot handle Trados files, a definite disadvantage for translators working for agencies.

Other Worthies

For the others, it is an uphill battle. The field is dominated by Trados, DV and Wordfast, and that's it. Does not mean the other competitors are no good. Very much on the contrary. However, they have not made it to the big league.

SDLX (<http://www.sdlintl.com/products/sdlx/nav/main.htm>) is developing fast, is easy to use and has a very pretty system which shows formatting changes in different colors—a lot prettier than the code system used by DV or Transit, but not necessarily more efficient. The user list is sdlx@yahoogroups.com and messages are answered either by other users or by SDL personel. SDLX is a strong candidate for the big league.

SDLX, however lacks some of the tools provided by DV. SDLX can do without a dongle, which is a mixed blessing and reminds me I have not touched on the matter of dongles so far, and should do it before it is too late.

The Gift of Pirates

The dongle is the gift of pirates to the computer-user community. In case you don't know, it is a gismo you stick into the printer port, to convince your computer that the copy of the program you are using is legit. I have never had any problems with dongles. I have a Zip drive connected to the printer port, two dongles connected to the Zip drive and the printer connected to the dongles without any perceptible problem. Others face horrible problems with dongles and will do anything to be free from the gadget.

Programs that do not use a dongle use a code supplied by the developer and entered by the user—just like Windows or MS Office. What happens if your HD crashes and you have to reinstall? Well, if you use SDLX, for instance, you write support and they will give you a new code. They are very efficient, but God forbid you have to reinstall on Saturday, because SDL does not work over the weekend.

Wordfast has a simpler system and you can reuse your old code, provided you have made a note of it somewhere and can find it when needed—but that is bound to change when it goes commercial.

Now we can return to our main subject.

Back to the Other Worthies

I have had very little experience with TRANS Suite 2000 (<http://www.cypresoft.com>), a program that seems to have a very small base of happy users. The user list (ts2000_users@yahoogroups.com) has been created very recently and has not begun its teething process so far: just a very small number of nice messages promptly answered

by support. Perhaps it will catch with time. A new TRANS Suite version is due shortly and their prices have plummeted. In fact, talking about prices, it seems that all of them will go down in the near future—not a bad thing at all.

The last item I would like to mention here is Wordfisher (www.wordfisher.com), developed by our colleague Tibor Környei, with which I also have a regrettably limited experience. Some of my friends down here—people I respect very much—claim there is no way but the Wordfisher way to deal with a job and the user list (wfisher@uajooroups.com) has nothing but praise for the product. Tibor answers questions extra-quickly, but does not seem to have updated the program in a while.

Fathoming the Future

I was a small kid in the 1950s and liked to read comics about what the world would be in the year two thousand. The year 2000 has come and gone and all the predictions proved wrong. So much for predictions.

But there are some perceptible trends. One is the creation of "light" versions that you can download free of charge and use when working for an agency that has purchased the "full" edition. This is not as much of a blessing as it looks. The price you pay for a translation tool is probably less than what it costs you to learn it. And with this business of free download, any agency will now claim that they can demand a job done in their favorite program and we will end up by investing endless hours learning new programs and readapting to old ones. In fact, some agencies do have their in-house tools which they force on translators. I absolutely refuse to work with them.

The other trend is establishing a standard format for exchanging translation memories. Another mixed blessing and misleading development. First, the fact that Reguspatoff Pro, the new wonder of the translation software market can deal with TMX memories exported by Trados does not mean that it can deal with Trados files. Second, each program segments texts in a different way. This means that although you can import a memory from program A into program B using TMX or some other standard, this does not mean that B will find the same matches as A. However, as I said above, both Wordfast and DV handle Trados files without problem.

Now what?

Have I made choices easier for you? Perhaps not. The views expressed here are very subjective. I like certain things and dislike others and it probably shows in this article. In my previous talks about translation software I used to try to hide my personal preferences, but I no longer do it. However, you should not buy anything just because I like it—or because there is a promotion on and they are selling it cheap.

My suggestion is first download a demo from the developer's site (Rule # 1: don't buy if you can not test it free of charge for at least a couple weeks, doing real work), test it for a bit, using the types of file you usually have to handle (you may find that the program you like best does not handle the type of file you translate more often). See whether the program is compatible with your system (for instance, Wordfast does not work well with MSOffice 97 and Win 95).

Join the user lists and lurk for a bit to see what other people like and dislike and decide whether it is the place for you. Ask a few questions to see whether they get answered. Have a good look at the manuals and online help and see whether you can live with them.

But don't say you don't need translation memory software. Translation memory software is software for translators. If you translate using Word for Windows (for writers) or, say, PageMaker (intended for DTP work) you are using knives to tighten screws. Try using the right tool and you will see the difference.

This article was originally published at Translation Journal (<http://accurapid.com/journal>).