

Useful Tools for the Translator

By Emily Lemon

The modern translator has a multitude of tools at his or her disposal, all of which have their own strengths and weaknesses that the user must be aware of. Word processors, spreadsheets, databases, and the World Wide Web offer assistance in ways that could not have been imagined by translators of years past. As each tool has its own selling points, the benefits and drawbacks need to be examined and evaluated.

The first tool that will be discussed is the word processor, the industry standard being Microsoft Word. Because it is used globally and is available for different operating systems, it is an essential part of the translator's repertoire. It allows one to make an electronic version of a paper text, store it, and manipulate it so it can be sent across the globe in seconds. The text can be edited and reformatted easily; a grammar and spell check can be run to pick up possible mistakes missed by the eye. Another common use for Word is for the creation of glossaries and tables, which can then be sorted and filtered.

The biggest benefit of Microsoft Word is its ease of use and ubiquity. It can be learned quickly and the intricacies of the program are abundant; with each new version there is more to learn. Although the program has so much to offer the learner, it is designed to be quite user-friendly. Large amounts of data can be stored in Word files and sorting through the information is aided by such features as "find" and "replace". Another extremely helpful feature is "track changes"; this makes a proofreader's changes visible or invisible as desired. The possibility of such add-ons like Wordfast expands the value of Word to the translator.

Weaknesses of the word-processor include the time it takes to set up a glossary; this can be done more quickly using, for example, a spreadsheet. The steps involved in sorting, replacing, deleting unwanted paragraph marks, and pasting in new information in alphabetically may become time-consuming. Another drawback to using Word to create glossaries is that one is limited by the size of the page. In working with texts, the benefits of the grammar and spell check might be outweighed by the eagerness of the tool; what appear to the software to be errors get mistakenly "corrected".

Spreadsheets are mainly used to organize data, memory banks, and organizational tasks such as budgets or schedules. Its strengths are that it is easy to update, sort and retrieve information. If one has an enormous database and would like to share a part of it, this part can be exported into a spreadsheet and passed along. There is no limit to the cell size, which can be useful when there is a large amount of information to be entered. Being that spreadsheets are so efficient when dealing with numbers and formulas, they are essential for the freelance translator in terms of running a business.

Although the spreadsheet has much to offer, the fact that it is static limits it. It is accessible to one user at a time, which is appropriate when one is creating a personal glossary, but it is not as up-to-date as a dynamic glossary that is created as a database. The items can be sorted by column but not multi-directionally. This limits the availability of information stored in the spreadsheet. Another negative point is the visual aspect. The data is visible in full format and if the unlimited size of the cells has been taken advantage of, the text will be difficult to read.

The database is a tool for storing and organizing data. The important difference is, that information is stored in a database is dynamic and when networked can be added to by multiple users. The information can grow and change; it is alive. This is appropriate when dealing with language-based information, as language itself is both personal and public, changing and developing every day.

The benefits of the database to the translator are that it is easy to manipulate and, as stated above, accessible to different users. It can store enormous amounts of data and if separate tables are used, there is no duplication of entries, unlike in Word. All the information can be retrieved as content or used as a search term, unlike in a spreadsheet.

Its weaknesses are mainly centred on its complexity. While Word is user-friendly and Excel can be learned quickly, using a database takes time, patience, and the will to learn.

Perhaps the most vast and multi-functional tool for the translator is the Internet. Its uses are multitudinous, covering all stages of the translator's work. Through such websites as Proz.com or Translatorscafe.com, jobs are posted and acquired. Research can be done with the help of constantly updated websites and encyclopaedias in different languages. Machine translations are available online, although they are very rough and have to be heavily edited. Multiple forums exist for translators to post questions and receive answers quickly from a wide array of experts and laypersons. Online dictionaries are accessible in both bi-lingual and monolingual format.

One positive aspect of the Internet is its speed; information can be accessed in seconds. Another is that it is extremely easy to use and is available in almost every corner of the globe. Like the database, it is dynamic. Dictionaries and encyclopaedias are constantly growing and changing. The information provided is usually quite up-to-date.

Being that these information sources are accessible to so many people, this leads to the biggest difficulty with the Internet, the issue of accuracy. One cannot be certain that definitions are correct in dictionaries and it is prudent to cross-reference with a hard copy source. Another interesting point is that information is often challenging to cite. Frequently one cannot find the original source of a text; this leads to inaccuracy. Another common challenge with the Internet is its enormity. This is both a positive and a negative aspect of the tool. Even the most obscure bit of information can be found, but in this search it is possible to find oneself lost, misled, or distracted for hours.

In conclusion, when the translator is aware of what these tools have to offer, a lot of work and time can be saved. The key is to be adept and efficient at using what is available to enhance the quality of the process of translation and the translation itself. Time can just as easily be wasted using the right tool for the wrong task. As basic tools like the Internet and word processing programs have become indispensable for translators today, so will computer assisted translation tools perhaps in the near future.

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