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Has the CAT got your tongue?

Computer aided translation (CAT) offers huge benefits. But, in the culturally specific world of fashion, a one-size-fits-all approach is far from ideal.

White paper

The landscape of translation and localisation services has changed dramatically with advances in technology. CAT has undoubtedly increased the speed and consistency of translation hugely, and has brought down the cost for buyers. It has become the industry standard: in the 2012 State of the Industry Report (Proz.com, 2012), 88% of translators responded that they were using CAT tools for their work – a figure which will only have increased.

Translation memory (TM) is a particularly useful tool. Storing approved translated terms and phrases from previous related projects, these can be reused on demand for new work. TM looks for 100% matches with previously translated material; it scans for “fuzzy” matches, where the context or phrasing may be slightly different.

For those clients who have built up a large TM and have a great deal of repeat material, turnaround times have drastically reduced. As they are simply recycling their old materials with 100% and fuzzy matches. Those who have dedicated time or resources for creating and maintaining a reliable term base set up have seen their translations become more consistent, even if their favoured translators are not available to work on their projects. The inbuilt quality check features of the latest CAT tools also prevent certain types of errors creeping into documents (mainly formal ones, such as tags, double-spaces, but if well used also terminological inconsistencies).

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Computer vs. human

And yet, despite their constant evolution and refinements there are still inherent limitations. Certain forms of translation simply don't follow the one-to-one straight-jacket that all CAT tools impose. Understanding when it's time to turn the tool off and let the human translator use his or her best judgment – and, where necessary, creativity – is vital to the production of truly localised content.

Professional translators and localisation experts offer more than just literal translation. To localise is to adapt culturally. This involves connotation, emotions, associations. Errors of translation have become infamous. Fashion retailer Mango, for example, experienced a massive backlash when it described certain jewellery items as “slave style” on its French e-commerce site¹.

In the original Spanish, the word “esclava” can be used to describe kinds of bracelets or necklaces, as well as a translation for “slave”. After a Twitter boycott campaign began trending (#BoycottonsMango), the company moved quickly to acknowledge the error of judgment. So while some mistranslations merely amuse, others cause great offence, and the majority cause a company to lose credibility.

Often based on a catchy phrase of very few words, marketing content is particularly prone to mistranslation – and in a highly visible form. It is equally prominent on product packaging, which bears the added problem of being expensive to reprint and difficult to recall if mistranslations happen.

Glaring errors are not the only issues in these areas. When it comes to selling a product, the wording must be tailored specifically to the target audience. It must create the right cultural connotations, and motivate the consumer. In the world of fashion, vocabulary is as varied as the items themselves. From street style to designer decadence, the translation needs to match the linguistic “feel” as much as the literal meaning.

In some cases, the only real answer is to transcreate. This is a process in which a localisation company works alongside their client to produce a new version in the target language; one which is culturally relevant, accurate, and which sounds as though it was written in that language in the first place. It is a task which only a creative, talented translator will be able to undertake.

And, in such cases, we need to acknowledge that CAT tools may often be more of a hindrance rather than a help. One of the problems is that the use of CAT tools has become so automatic that no one ever sits back and considers not using them. This is true of both sides, translators and translation companies as well as translation buyers. Approaching every project in the same way – and with the same tools – will, in time, lead to potentially damaging errors. It is all too often assumed that CAT will be used no matter the circumstances. Instead, we need to ask at the outset: what are the best ways to approach this project, and how can CAT help?

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2288098/Mango-jewellery-Fashion-giant-forced-apologise-Slave-Style-range-sparks-consumer-backlash.html>

Linguistic flexibility

CAT tools without doubt are here to stay and they will continue to be used in 95% of projects. In the fashion industry as in any other, a consistent and cooperative approach to translation is important. When four or five different translators are working on a project at the same time, CAT provides an excellent solution to problems of consistency. With particular collections or items, for example, term bases are key for avoiding conflicting or undesirable translations of particular vocabulary. TM can also help with process-driven content (such as on an e-commerce site), which needs to be clear and accurate.

But anyone who cares to take a closer look at a CAT tool will quickly realise where its main limitation lies. It is essentially a two-column table, with the source text in one column (or row), and the target in the second. The text is chopped up into “segments”, which essentially are sentences: strings of words terminated by a full stop. So for each source sentence the translator fills in a matching cell with his or her translation.

This leaves very little room for language manoeuvres – the ability to adapt according to cultural context. Although it is possible to merge two sentences, the initial sentence-by-sentence view of the document is a natural bar to flexible thinking. Furthermore, it is practically impossible to remove a redundant sentence, and it is entirely impossible to swap sentences around, as you would then lose your 1:1 equivalence – nullifying all advantages of a TM.

Working to scale

Localising into another language is, as we have established, never a simple one-to-one correspondence. In situations where doing so is attempted, larger problems arise. Take as an example a piece of advertising copy which has English as its source. It is two paragraphs long, and needs to fit within a very image-rich brochure. Using an industry-standard CAT tool, the translator is set up to translate sentence by sentence. The tool flags up an error if a sentence is missed, which is all well and good when a long piece of text is to be translated.

What if some of those words are significantly longer than the space we have? And what if, on top of that, a translation into a target language such as German becomes overly long and clunky?

By sticking with the CAT tool’s sentence-by-sentence structure, the translator is bound to offer up a translation with an equal number of sentences. The translation must bear a direct relation to the source, since it is to be added to the translation memory and anything else will cause errors (false positives, or alignment errors) in further translations.

If it were possible, the translator would prefer to take that copy, remove it from the CAT tool structure, and recreate it in an elegant, alternative format. The objective is to deliver a message in a way that naturally suits the target language rather than the source materials, giving the customer a high-quality piece of marketing which will actually sell their services.

Making the call

In the situation outlined above, our translator is in a difficult situation. The content is already within TM, and it will be difficult and time-consuming to make the switch to human translation.

This is where a localisation expert can really add value to a client's project. It is a far better situation for a client to be made aware in advance of the limitations of CAT tool translation for their specific requirements. Through open dialogue, the localisation expert can understand what the client's needs are – including cultural adaptation and transcreation.

Having the conversation

Now that CAT tools are such a core part of the translation process, with budgetary implications for words processed (dictated by the TM), clients can be surprisingly reluctant to trust a human element. There is a fear that the turnaround times will be slower and that they may have to pay for a sentence again which they have already paid for.

Yet in terms of output, clients with high-profile material which will be customer-facing in numerous different locations need creativity and quality. It is inevitably a better solution for them to have content which has been translated well the first time, with a full awareness of all the cultural implications.

Their presence and reputation will be much stronger with an excellently-written piece of copy, or a brilliantly localised piece of game dialogue, than with something which sounds stilted in its target language thanks to a rigid following of the CAT tool system. Additionally, there is a critical time-save in not having "bad" translations thrown back and re-done, which is the outcome in the better situation where the lack of cultural awareness or clunky wording has been picked up.

In short, like your favourite wardrobe items, there is a time and a place for everything – CAT tools included. The stakes are high, because fashion is big business – the global apparel industry is estimated to be worth \$2.4 trillion annually. And it is growing. McKinsey & Company recently described fashion as "one of the past decade's rare success stories"².

The ability of fashion companies to expand into new markets is critical to its ongoing success – and localising content is an important element of this. And in an industry where creativity is paramount, we need to be aware of the limitations of the CAT approach. For cultural knowledge and linguistic dexterity, the human touch will never go out of style.

² <http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-state-of-fashion>

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