

Language Technology in the service of communication: a profitable exploitation of Translation Aiding Tools

"...Our world is getting...smaller and smaller every day! Distance in communication is being reduced even more...People, nations, governments, organizations, companies and scientific communities feel the urge to develop closer contacts, to exchange information, to cooperate. In that world, Translation and Interpretation services acquire an extremely significant role. They are asked to intercede and facilitate communication..."

ALPHABET Communication material

Background

ALPHABET was founded in 1996 to provide specialist translation and interpretation services and it quickly attracted clients from a range of big-name clients, despite being a relative newcomer. It has a total of 20 employees, including freelancers. Services include the translation of scientific, technical, financial, legal, medical and other documents in many language pairs, and interpreting at conferences, seminars and other events.

By combining a complete understanding of modern market needs with high level of knowledge and skills in information and communication technologies, ALPHABET LTD has rapidly come to be recognized as a highly professional and specialized company in the field of translation and interpretation in Greece.

ALPHABET has been taking advantage of the latest technology, and especially human language technologies, through its use of Translation Memory (TM) tools to improve productivity and cost effectiveness. The TM tools they use are TrAID, a system designed and developed by the Institute for Language and Speech Processing, a dedicated Greek NLP Research Institute, and Translator's Workbench from TRADOS.

As Mr. Papanikolaou, ALPHABET's Managing Director and language technology specialist says: "In the beginning, some clients are skeptical about using machines to aid translation, but when they see how much quicker the response time is, they change their minds. In the end, they appreciate it!"

The Opportunity

A considerable number of texts submitted to ALPHABET share the same structure and terminology and have a high percentage of material reused from previous versions of the same, or similar, documents. The method commonly used to reduce the time spent on bulk translation was for translators to consult previous translations of relevant documents and manually identify the parts of the texts which best matched the text to be translated. This procedure proved to be time consuming and inefficient.

The ILSP TrAID and TRADOS TM tools were identified as a way of improving this process by reusing the existing electronic collection of source and target texts and by automating the manual matching and retrieval procedure.

Development & Implementation

The selection of the software was made after consultations with various company representatives, extensive search of web sites, and testing of a number of other tools. Translator's Workbench was selected as a well-known and tested tool, while TrAID offers extensive customization possibilities and direct on-site support and training. The two products are used in parallel.

ALPHABET had specific text formatting and handling needs that could be met only by a significant level of customization and close cooperation with the developers. At that time, TRADOS did not offer any customization facilities, so this was only feasible in the case of TrAID. At the end of the customization phase, which lasted 3 months and included a good deal of feedback and system tuning, the system was ready to be field-tested by users.

After the end of the customization period the learning curve was relatively short and required no additional special user skills, since the TrAID development team did provide initial on-site training. ALPHABET staff now train users new to the system, which needs no extra hardware and software, thus contributing to the cost effectiveness of the solution.

Four translators are currently using the tools in 2 of the 10 current translation projects, which represents around 30% of the current translation volume. Translator's Workbench and TrAID are used in parallel depending on the characteristics and needs of each project. For example, heavily formatted texts are mainly processed using the customized version of TrAID.

The reasons the tools are not used on the other projects is mainly due to hard copy source texts, not easily transferable to a digital form, or to the lack of similar already translated material. Digitisation is only cost effective when a high percentage of matches with previously translated texts is achieved.

Mr. Papanikolaou is happy with the responsiveness of the technology provider and the regular field maintenance provided through upgrades and patches. The location of the provider contributes to this close contact and facilitates communication between the two parties.

Benefits

Although no detailed cost-effectiveness studies have been conducted, Mr. Papanikolaou claimed that performance and quality of service was considerably enhanced through the use of TM tools. This claim is further sustained by the fact that TM tools have been regularly used for the past five years, and that in-house translators view them positively and have come to rely on them.

More and more customers specifically ask for such tools to be used in the translation of their texts and this is often a prerequisite in calls for tender for translation projects. Customers believe that these tools can deliver faster and more consistent output. However, the majority of customers is still unaware of LT tools and is reluctant to explore application scenarios for their use. As Mr. Papanikolaou comments, this situation matches that existing in many companies where no central and organized translation departments are foreseen and –of course- no use of modern LT tools is made.

Conclusions

Mr. Papanikolaou highlights the fact that not many Greek translation service providers use this kind of software, due to their limited revenues and the relatively under-developed nature of this business area in Greece. Another possible factor is cost, which could, of course, fall significantly if competition among TM providers increases. Last but not least, Mr. Papanikolaou would recommend that any company looking for a real return-on investment in this field invest on LT tools.

This article is based on an interview given by one of the managing directors of ALPHABET LTD, Mr. Ioannis Papanikolaou, on May 14th 2001. We would like to thank him very much for his help and cooperation.

ALPHABET LTD

Kifissias Av. 154, 15126,

Athens, Greece.

Tel. +301 8020111-12.

Fax +301 8020113

Email contact@alphabet-epe.gr

URL www.alphabet-epe.gr

Contact Person: Ioannis Papanikolaou, Managing Director

Institute for Language and Speech Processing (ILSP)

Department of Language Technology Applications in Office Systems

TrAID Team

Artemidos 6 & Epidavrou, 15125,

Athens, Greece.

Tel. +301 6875421

Fax +301 6854270

Email traid@ilsp.gr

URL www.ilsp.gr/traid_eng.html

Contact Person Stelios Piperidis

TRADOS CORPORATION

113 S. Columbus Street

Alexandria, VA 22314

Tel. + 1-703-683-6900

Fax + 1-703-683-9457

URL www.trados.com

Email info-eu@trados.com