

Closing the Content Gap:

Converging Authoring and Translation

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The translation industry has seen well over a decade of solid development and professionalization. Many companies, especially those with a significant international presence, have developed sophisticated translation methodologies and workflows. In addition to such companies' proprietary systems and technologies for managing processes, a broad array of linguistic, workflow, and content management tools is widely available. As a result, unit costs and turnaround times for translation have dropped, and process efficiency has improved dramatically.

Technical authors have experienced their own share of changes. More and more content development tasks fall to authors themselves (remember the desktop publishing “department”?). Their ranks have been outsourced, offshored, and downsized. The need for productivity drives everything, so technology—which always played an important role in the content development process—has become the main focus of the authoring workflow. Producing more and more content in less time, with fewer resources, is the mantra of every twenty-first-century knowledge worker.

In their inexorable drive for improvement, companies are now starting to rethink their global content strategies, redesigning them for the new world of continuous (did someone say *agile*?) and multilingual deployment. To do this, companies must unify their authoring and translation processes—but that isn't easy. Why? Because authors and translators have always considered their work distinct, and closing the gap that separates the two disciplines requires significant rethinking on both sides.

Different Views

The gap between authors and translators owes its existence to the classic ways that the two groups tend to view content. Authors are generally product-centric; that is, their work derives from the product itself: What does it look like? How does it work? How do users use it? This viewpoint means that authors must understand the product and its users before they write a single word. They then transform that understanding into content in an effort to make the product more usable.

Translation, by contrast, is not product-centric but content-centric. To do their work, translators must understand the content—not necessarily the product. In some ways, the product itself is of marginal relevance to translators (who almost never see it). In today's increasingly high-churn, microdrop translation landscape, you might even say that translators are segment-centric (segments are the sentences that translation tools create by breaking down larger content such as user guides or help).

When authors create content, they are seeking to serve users' interests by making the product more usable. (Products should, ideally, be perfectly usable without content, but I digress.) The authors' objective is to document how the product is used and to tell users how to extract maximum value from it. Sometimes, they must bring their interpretive powers to bear, for example by documenting how the product is *supposed* to work, as opposed to how it actually works (the unenviable but classic phenomenon of documenting bugs as “features”).

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The goal of translators, on the other hand, is to faithfully reproduce the content's current meaning and form in another language. They must never add or remove anything (even information that is missing or incorrect). Any interpretive skills that translators possess generally apply at the granular level—for example, in determining terminology, writing style, speech register, and so forth. And, unlike authoring, translation work is fully scoped at the outset and must meet well-defined budget and turnaround time metrics.

In short, the classic view of the content landscape holds that authoring contributes knowledge to a product, whereas translation is merely the linguistic duplication of that knowledge. The resulting “content gap” has served to not so much highlight the need for closer collaboration as to delineate more clearly which tasks belong to which side.

Reasons to Close the Gap

If it helps clarify who does what, what's wrong with a content gap between authors and translators? Plenty!

Money. The content gap wastes money—lots of it. When authors and translators aren't aligned in furthering the fundamental mission of content, it often ends up bloated, disorganized, and inefficient. Translate that content into other languages, and the only sound that corporations hear is money flying out of their coffers. Translators shouldn't delude themselves into thinking that they'll make more revenue from bloated content. Corporations may temporarily spend more money on translation, but they will be highly motivated to find a cheaper solution, and the easiest way to save money is to spend less—or even (gasp!) nothing—on translation.

Time. With wasted money comes wasted time. Content designed without a global, multilingual framework in mind takes longer to produce. Products get to their target markets slower, and corporations make less money. Inefficient, noncollaborative processes also waste time, and the resulting schedule crunch puts the squeeze on resources and content quality. End users aren't served, and there's plenty of finger-pointing across the content gap.

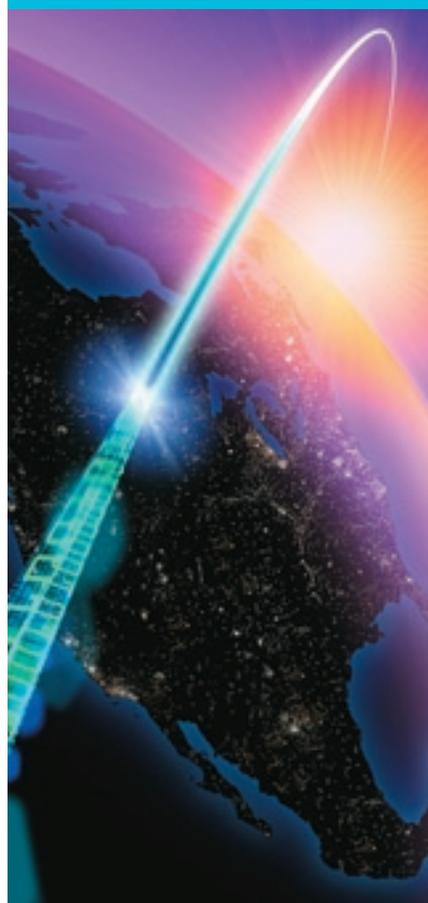
Globalization. Content isn't created or translated in one place. Increasingly, content is written, edited, assembled, rendered, and delivered by many authors, translators, and managers in many places, working more or less at the same time. Efficiency, global economics, and tools are driving us into a collaborative, interactive, real-time production environment. It's not hard to imagine a time in the not-too-distant future when content will be microcreated and delivered in all languages simultaneously (think of a streaming, multilingual wiki). Separate authoring and translation processes will no longer apply.

Quality. This area is where authors and translators have narrowed the content gap the most, unfortunately by routinely avoiding the topic. Neither side talks much about the actual content created. Instead, they talk incessantly about tools, workflow, costs, processes, and content management. These things

are important and provide marginal improvements, but the desperately needed step-change in content quality, usability, and productivity won't come until authors and translators unite in service of the end users, no matter what language they speak. Raising the quality of the content in all languages represents our greatest challenge—and our greatest opportunity.

Ultimately, the most important motivation for eliminating the gap between authoring and translation is the end

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user. Users don't care how content is created or translated; they don't have the slightest interest in how much it costs, how long it took to make, how hard the work was, which tool was used, or who owns the translation memories. End users judge content by the simplest criterion of all: "What does the content do for me?" If their answer to this question isn't sufficiently positive, we all might as well quit while we're behind.

A Multilevel View of Multilingual Content

So, how do authors and translators start closing the content gap and truly collaborating to develop multilingual, global content that really serves end users? We need to begin by viewing content differently. Content isn't just a bunch of guides, help, and Web sites—and translation isn't just their mechanical duplication. Multilingual content is part of the product's user experience and reflects the complex, simultaneous goals of every corporation.

Authors and translators alike need to understand content in terms of the multiple objectives it serves on the strategic, enterprise, and practical levels. These levels and their considerations inform and guide multilingual content development, and offer a way of uniting authors and translators in a common mission.

Let's take a look at how these levels manifest themselves in two of the most common challenges that we all face in creating multilingual content: lowering translation costs and improving translation quality.

Lowering Translation Costs

In most companies, product groups are routinely instructed to lower costs. They usually do this by finding cheaper service providers (through requests for proposals, for example), replacing services with technological solutions (content management as panacea), or translating less ("we won't translate the online help"). On the strategic level, authors and translators can better meet this corporate directive by aligning their efforts with the corporation's business goals. For example, they can help define the scope of translation according to cor-

porate market and branding objectives (investment in Spanish-language content can be amortized over a dozen markets, for instance). They can work together to reduce content volume and prevent its runaway growth (and, therefore, its cost). In other words, there are numerous latent opportunities for authors and translators to reduce content.

On the enterprise level, companies need multilingual content architectures that better integrate authoring and translation. Content silos, especially in bigger enterprises, are huge wasters of money that could be reallocated to fund multilingual content development that is actually useful. There are also many opportunities to prioritize the reuse of content in smart ways, leveraging the right multilingual architecture by establishing trusted core content (for example, content that changes less frequently) that is centrally accessible to the entire enterprise. Managing the full range of enterprise content more cost-effectively means taking multilingual content into account. Critical to success are dynamic tools and processes (those that separate text from presentation, for instance) that allow for easy adaptation (by market, region, and language).

On the practical level, to lower translation costs, authors and translators must have a truly global view of content. Translation memories (TMs) are tremendous tools for reducing costs, but they should be managed actively. TMs constitute only one type of content driver (and far from the most important one). Authors need to focus on granular reuse techniques instead of just relying on a content management system for “chunking.” Authors can build optimal content from the ground up, and TMs will reflect this efficiency and grow. Here, too, purposeful volume reduction creates cost benefits on both sides of the content gap.

Improving Translation Quality

When it comes to the quality of multilingual content, fingers are usually pointed across the content gap squarely at translators: They should be subject-matter experts, they should proofread more, they should research terminology better, and so on. No doubt, all of these

things will improve quality, but whatever translators do, it's only half the answer. Translation quality comes first from the content itself, and that's the authors' responsibility.

By viewing content on the strategic level, authors and translators can focus on key considerations like branding and market presence. This will help them understand where top quality is critical and where it isn't—where good enough is good enough. They also need to consider the content's volatility: is it relatively static (for example,

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corporate information) or frequently changing (product updates)? This strategic view determines the content's shelf life, so efforts to raise quality can be targeted toward where they will do the most good. Content lives and dies by its consistency (read: *reliability*) and currency. Strategically speaking, content needs to buttress the perception that a particular product is reliable and consistent—and such content must be current in all markets.

On the enterprise level, it's critical to leverage value-added across the enterprise. Content is generated in many areas—technical publications, training, marketing, and so on—and usually, its translations reflect this disparity. Harvesting and combining the best practices and ideas across the enterprise eliminates waste and optimizes processes. Of necessity, content will improve (reuse, consistency, currency ... the list goes on). Adding technology (a content management system, for instance) can create some astounding enterprise value.

Finally, content quality rests on the practical implementation of simple best practices. Many corporations have become victims of their own well-intentioned efforts to establish templates, style guides, and the like. These have become sacred cows for authors. But many do more harm than good. The guidelines are often created in ignorance of multilingual and global content factors; they may actually encourage authors to create inefficient, bloated content (like software documentation that scrupulously reproduces every product screen and describes it in excruciating detail—heaven help us).

Practices and truisms from the age of linear, printed content also impair quality. Authors still feel the need to introduce, state, and summarize every piece of information; to include things “just in case”; and to write with variety and empathy. In today's high-churn, microdrop information world, these practices are going away, but not fast enough. As a result, content frustrates end users, and authors and translators continue to conspire—albeit unwittingly—to propagate this misery to the four corners of the globe.

Mind the Gap

Whether you're an author or a translator, one thing is for sure: if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. The content gap may be larger or smaller in any given organization, but it's there, and the time has come to close it. Authors and translators must work together much more closely to create content that is truly in the best interests of end users. Until this happens, corporate decision makers will find whatever ways they can (offshoring? machine translation?) to diminish the content crisis they see looming. **1**

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