FIT Position Paper on Crowdsourcing of Translation Services

In recent years, crowdsourcing has been an increasingly widespread phenomenon in the translation sector. FIT, as the voice of associations of translators, interpreters and terminologists around the world, would therefore like to provide some information on this subject and draw attention to diverse consequences for the users of translation services as well as professional translators and their associations.

Crowdsourcing in the translation field can be defined as "getting translation completed in parallel rather than consecutively, via a large pool of bilinguals (either amateur or professional translators, or both) on a volunteer or paid basis".[1]

A few examples of crowdsourced translation projects are:

1) localisation of the Facebook website,
2) fan-based translation of anime films,
3) localisation of Evernote software,
4) translations for MOOC platforms (massive open online courses),
5) the EU Commission's recent initiative aimed at crowdsourcing the subtitling of films to increase the circulation of European works.[2]

Expectations

Companies and other entities that crowdsource translation jobs generally assume that this practice lowers their costs through a new pool of cheap labour, ensures greater speed due to a high number of collaborators, allows more flexibility and makes it possible to handle greater volumes of content. They rely on the commitment and enthusiasm of the translators, who often regard it as a form of direct user involvement or even as pro bono work.

Crowdsourcing might have proved suitable in other business areas (e.g. for product and service innovation at technology companies) and may be appropriate for certain types of jobs in the translation sector, especially since content is growing at an incredible rate and might otherwise not be translated at all. This applies especially to content in minority languages.

However, the numerous disadvantages have to be kept in mind.

Drawbacks and pitfalls

The "crowd" may be a heterogeneous, anonymous mass or a group of specialists. In other words, how can users of a crowdsourced translation be sure that the translation was done with the necessary linguistic and technical knowhow? Furthermore, how can the members of the crowd be

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[1] http://www.language-translation-help.com/crowdsourcing.html
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/commission-launches-eu1-million-initiative-crowdsource-subtitling-increase-circulation-european
and a reaction:
https://anglosubtitlers.wordpress.com/2015/09/29/open-letter-from-untertitelforum-atve-to-the-european-commission/

genuinely motivated if they receive low or no remuneration? There is the risk that they may quit at any time. The members of the crowd have no professional ethos.

Above all, there is the question of how the workflow and quality management is to be handled. A great deal of time and effort is needed for coordination and supervision. In particular, who is responsible for eliminating errors and ensuring the requisite quality, i.e. does the translation fulfil the intended purpose? It has to be determined who is ultimately accountable both for the translation and for the project management.

Normally, it is not sufficient if other members of the heterogeneous, anonymous crowd are entrusted with revising the translations. In addition, the translators in the crowd are often confronted with a text of unknown source and without the overall context.

Last but not least, precautions have to be taken to avoid copyright and confidentiality infringements.

Consequences for professional translators

Like many other sectors, the translation market is changing rapidly. For example, the use of machine translation is also on the increase. Translators should seek to respond to the new developments in good time and see how to derive benefits for themselves.

Amateur and professional translation will continue to coexist. In some cases, an amateur community itself takes the initiative (e.g. Harry Potter translations), completely ignoring copyright issues.

However, professional translators, who have the appropriate skills and qualifications, will still be needed for demanding, high-quality products, e.g. highly specialised legal and medical texts, marketing texts and confidential documents, to name but a few. They are increasingly being called on to correct translations done by amateurs and to post-edit machine translations. This has to be kept in mind when negotiating the fees for those kinds of jobs.

Companies that crowdsource translations may well discover that, organisationally and financially, this practice is not worthwhile in the long run and that it is better to draw on the services of professional translators in the first place. After all, correcting a poor translation can take longer and will definitely be more expensive than having the translation done from scratch by a professional translator.

In the case of crowdsourcing projects, professional translators can become involved in handling the preselection procedure as well as workflow and quality management on the basis of adequate remuneration.

The role of translator associations

Against this background, translator associations have a duty to provide information to everyone concerned, not least so that users are fully aware of the appropriate and inappropriate uses of crowdsourcing and professional translators can position themselves accordingly in the evolving translation market.