Contents

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1) Each Topic has a two-letter abbreviation, for example
- CL for Controlled Language
- CO for Consulting
- ET for Education & Training
- GI for Graphics/Illustrations
- RU for Readability/Usability
- TO for Tools
- TR for Translation Issues

The contributions (articles or comments) are numbered consecutively through the different issues of TC-Forum.

When commenting to any of the contributions, please refer to these "codes" for ease of understanding.

Dear technical communicators,

the first year of TC-Forum is over and I have more than enough reasons to say thank you.

The number of subscribers has increased by 50% in this first year - this by itself shows that the idea of TC-Forum, to have a worldwide discussion medium for technical communicators has been well received. Thanks to the large number of contributions from you, the subscribers, TC-Forum has grown to a respectable 20-page "magazine". It is being distributed free of charge to recipients in (currently) 29 countries of the world, and to member organizations of INTECOM.

TC-Forum is a non-profit initiative by professional communicators, in which the contents derive from contributions by colleagues from all over the world. The process of editing, illustrating, layout and production is also a teamwork among colleagues in different countries – modern electronic techniques make it possible. National contact persons are volunteering in 11 countries, for you to contact if you have a question concerning TC-Forum or the particular situation in your country (see page 19). If you live in a country where there is no NCP, consider volunteering yourself. You may find that you'll get as much out of it as you put into it.

Our world is characterized by fast technological developments. This also affects our work as technical communicators:

- The product development cycles are shorter and shorter, and product information also needs to be produced faster.
- The demand for high quality product information is growing - not only for legal reasons, but also because of a growing conscientiousness among manufacturers and users.
- The tools we are working with change just as fast and force us to constantly adapt our knowledge and learn new technologies.

This situation asks for a fast and efficient exchange of information and experience among technical communicators. TC-Forum has been designed to serve this purpose.

The printed version of TC-Forum will be supplemented by our Website, and from next year on there will be mailing lists for the individual topics in which you can communicate personally and faster than in this paper version. Look into our Website http://www.tc-forum.org for further information.

The issues in 1998 will also inform about the progress of Forum 2000, the international conference on technical communication which will take place in England in June.

Nils P. Smeby from Sweden has designed a special cartoon character for TC-Forum. Its name, one of several proposed by subscribers of TC-Forum, was chosen by the NCPs, who voted for the design of their choice. The result was "TeeCee". This name – together with "TC", which sounds just like "TeeCee", won an absolute majority. The winners are Dr. Annegret Zimmermann from Germany, Richard Andersen from Denmark (both suggested TeeCee) and Sigmund Tveito from Norway (who suggested TC).

Fear not! We don't plan to change TC-Forum into an entertainment magazine. We just hope that TeeCee will occasionally create a little smile on your face and make you feel even more comfortable with TC-Forum – just as a few crystals of salt or sugar can make a meal more delicious.

To close, let me remind you that we have asked you several times during the year to return a filled-in address sheet if you want to continue receiving TC-Forum. Since postage is expensive, and the number of subscribers is growing (and we hope will grow even further), we will stop sending copies to those of you who haven't indicated interest in receiving future copies.
So, if in 1998 you don't receive TC-Forum but would like to, please email or fax us your address (both postal and email).

Thank you all for your support. I look forward to another successful year with your contributions, comments, letters, and ideas to further serve the community of technical communicators.

Best wishes for 1998.
Yours

Hans Greiner.

The Influence of Language and Culture on Written Communication (CL 12)

by Minna-Liisa Karjalainen and Juha Nordlund

Language reflects the special characteristics of each culture; its conventions, history, tradition, race, religion, and political stand. These cultural conventions do not only concern language, but also the way we view and perceive the world. That is why it is important for technical communicators to learn the conventions of a particular culture, and particularly its language, if they are to write the most suitable documentation for the target group.

The texts differ in structure as well.

Since the 1970s the understanding of culture has gained more recognition as an important component in the study of a foreign language. No matter where we live, what language we speak, and what culture we represent, our cultural background forms the framework through which we perceive the world.

Differences in Structure

As native Finnish speakers writing technical documentation in English, we are most familiar with the conventions characterized by the Finnish language and culture. As we researched the topic, we studied a Finnish linguist's (Anna Mauranen's) comparisons of Finnish and Anglo-American scientific texts. Her findings confirmed the idiosyncrasies common to Finnish writers that we have also detected in our work. The texts differ not only in grammar and vocabulary, but in structure as well. Finnish writers usually compose their texts by starting from the general and moving into the specifics, whereas Anglo-Americans often state the main points in the beginning. Typically, they elaborate the main points throughout the text. Compared to the American way of writing, the Finnish style may require more from the readers, who themselves have the responsibility of finding the main points of the text. This point received general agreement at Comtec'97.

Role of Vocabulary

Another topic addressed in the idea market of Comtec '97 was vocabulary. For example, in Finnish we have several descriptive words for snow, while American Indians have a similar broad choice in words to describe natural phenomena. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that though we firmly belong to a particular culture and, as such, possess an immense amount of culture-bound ways of behaving and expressing ourselves, we undoubtedly also exist as individuals, and have a particular gender. We therefore also observe the environment around us in our own personal way.

Moreover, as the world widens for people through the use of modern technology, it sometimes appears that people are less aware of their immediate surroundings, and thus, they may know more about everyday life thousands of kilometers away than about life in the neighboring village. We also have to take into account that in addition to the person writing the document, an equally important party is the recipient, that is the person decoding the language. A noteworthy point here is that text production is always culture-bound and the text has a place in two cultures: in the writer's and the recipient's.

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A Note on Controlled Language (CL 13)

by Johan Näsström:

In my opinion, the discussion on the Controlled English issue lacks one dimension: the intellectual level of the subject.

Not long ago, French was the language for diplomacy and German for technology. Within the medical world, Latin words are used combined with the native language. And it is unlikely that, for instance, TC-Forum ever will be produced in all languages necessary to cover the INTECOM member languages... So readers of research reports, scientific papers etc will need some knowledge in the main European languages in the future too. And it would be unhappy if these writers should be limited by a restricted and controlled vocabulary.

On the other hand there also is a trend to avoid the language problems. There will be more language-independent instructions using illustrations and symbols (as in "Safety-on-board"-instructions) as well as instructions based on multi-media technology. There are still lots of people unable to read at all.

Somewhere between these two extremes the Controlled Language approach may be useful. But, as Thomas L. Warren writes (CL4): "Should each language have its own version of Controlled Language and if so, who should develop it and maintain it?" And who should keep them synchronized with all the other European languages? That may cause more problems than it solves.

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What a Technical Translator Can Do For You (TR 3)

by Annegret Zimmermann

I work with a small team of scientists, specializing in technical documentation and translation. In the following text I will look from a different angle on the work of a technical translator. This paper is trying to answer the following questions:

1. Must a technical translator understand what he or she is translating?

2. Must a technical translator translate as faithfully as possible from the original, or is it sufficient if he/she simply translates the information?

3. If the answer to the first question is "Yes", and the answer to the second question is "Translate the information", what does the client gain from such translations?

The Classic View Point

I am a chemist and in 1992 I got by chance into the business of technical translation. Five years later, I still earn my living in technical documentation. I work freelance and mostly write German versions of English manuals (paper and online) for equipment and software used in chemical laboratories.

But still – after 5 years – I am astonished at the big gap between writers of technical documentation and their translators.

Technical writers tend to look on (or sometimes even look down on) translators as a sort of text processor (admittedly in human form); a person who moves text from one language to another.

I don't think this is an adequate view of the technical translator's job. The first and biggest mistake is thinking that you can translate a text without understanding it. Believe me, you can translate a text correctly only if you understand it and know the context; if you don't, the result not only may be funny but also may be grossly incorrect. (We all know the word-by-word translations

What a Technical Translator Can Do For You (cont.)

of documentation for certain low-cost digital clocks and similar products).

The second mistake – or misunderstanding – is that technical translations must be as faithful as possible to the original. This, I agree, must be the main goal when literary texts, business letters or contracts are translated – nobody wants to read the translator's version of the latest bestseller by Ken Follett, or of a business contract.

The main goal of technical translation must be that the translated text contains the same information as the original, but adapted to the new language. To achieve this includes rather more than translating.

A Different Approach

Let me start by describing my work: Being in the happy situation of working for clients who do not regard their translators as human word processors, for me translation of technical documentation includes

- complete understanding of the text (sometimes this is not as trivial as it sounds; it can include intensive research).
- some terminology work (i.e. accumulating the correct German vocabulary).
- checking the original text for inconsistencies, errors, etc (and of course informing the client so that the original might be corrected)
- adapting the safety information for local regulations.
- adapting the documentation to the German target group. (The training of laboratory personnel [my target group] differs quite distinctly even between the UK and Germany, both members of the EU. This includes adding or removing text. Of course, any changes are discussed with the client.)
- if necessary, adding update information.
- writing the German version in easy-to-understand German (or, put it like this: by using controlled language).
- adapting the layout to the default German version used by the client.

To sum it up: my work is rather more rewriting the documentation in German than simply translating it.

If you define the translator's task in such a way you need someone who does not only know the language but understands what it's all about - in short: you need an expert with sufficient language knowledge more than a translator with excellent language knowledge and usually little technical knowledge. (That's the way I got into this business).

But what does the client gain if translations are made in this way?

- First, and most important of all: the client gets a better documentation product in the target language.
- Second, there are a lot of by-products which can be used to improve the original version of the documentation. For instance, the translator can be used as a tester of the manual, by continually checking for inconsistencies, errors, bad writing. In this way, the translator acts as a sort of quality control.

Translating the way I do is indeed nearly identical to the work of a technical writer. When I have to describe my job I prefer to be called technical communicator – an expression that sums it up quite nicely.

Resume

Do you agree with the hypothesis that a technical translator also should be a technical communicator? How do YOU make your translations?
I would like to hear your opinions!

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The Making of Technical Translations - The Personal Angle (TR 4)

by Ingrid Fuckner

I am a chemist and earn my living by writing German versions of English manuals, just as my colleague Dr. Annegret Zimmermann does (she wrote "What a technical translator can do for you".

My English at its best is only average. In fact: my English was much better when I was a student of chemistry. Since the time I have started working as a technical translator I have forgotten a lot of it. Nevertheless, my clients like my manuals very much. How does this happen?

The Importance of the Language

When I started working as a technical translator I was just a physical chemist intensely interested in technology who had quite good English. Since then I have concentrated on improving my knowledge of science and technology as well as the psychology of learning, didactics and European regulations. My English unfortunately diminishes. My effort in further education focuses on the topics of the manuals - improving my English is only of subordinate status. Most important is increasing my specialist vocabulary.

My mediocre English doesn't matter because my clients don't want a translation as faithful as possible to the original, including the style, but they do want a perfect translation of information!

So, if I don't understand an instruction in the original text, I try to find out what it means by using my specialist literature rather than my dictionaries, because science is the same in all languages of all nations and I am curious and want to know everything!

Translating or Rewriting

During translating the text, you can not help to notice any ambiguities, errors, etc., in the original manual. These discrepancies are returned to the client and are used for improving the german manual as well as the original one. So my work also has the function of quality control.

After understanding the topic I rewrite the text in my own words. Doing this I keep in mind that I am writing for a German reader.

In this context let me tell you about a very interesting experiment at Forum 95 in Dortmund, Germany. One topic was explained using the same words in two different formulations. The amazing result: native English speakers preferred a different version than German readers.

The result: native English speakers preferred a different version.

An English text that is easily understood by an English reader may be scarcely comprehensible to a German reader. In fact, missing the cultural differences in translations may cause a lot of trouble: the text may become ambiguous and unclear.

Different Qualifications

The qualifications of an English user and a German user can differ considerably. At least from this point of view a good translation stops simply being a "translation" and starts developing its own life! Then I stop being a translator and start being a communicator.

I think this is most important for my work, because I see myself as some sort of teacher and try to make learning and understanding as easy as possible for my readers. My work as a technical communicator differs not much from what I did in the university: writing instructions for other students.

Conclusion

I do not simply translate the original texts, but I rewrite the manual in German (my mother-tongue), keeping the information of the original. I use a version of controlled German,

The Making of ... (cont.)

easy-to-understand and adapted to the target group. Since I have started working as a technical communicator I have improved my German and it is now a more precise language.

The main thing in getting a good translation is to understand the information in the text.

The main thing in getting a good trans lation is not only understanding the original language, but also understanding the information in the text and then transforming it into the target language.

Now you know why I enjoy my work as a technical communicator - even if I "only" translate texts. Sometimes I hear other technical translators complain that their work is quite boring. I never feel like this. Therefore I encourage my colleagues to develop their work to what they want it to be: a varied and interesting activity, where every new assignment stands for a challenge.

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Machine translation –

by Fred Klein

As one of the first users of commercial Machine Translation (MT) in the United States, and as a senior professional translator, I see MT as one of many "tools". As an independent expert without connections to the industry I can be objective. Since 1980 I have used one system for years and have worked on and tested others. Few translators have years of experience in both the conventional and the MT fields.

MT – as opposed to Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) – uses the computer (the machine) to perform a total translation online. CAT uses the computer as a tool to assist the human translator.

We do not know how we think. Only part of the human translation is understood and "programmable". Concrete, defined grammars elude us and language is constantly changing, living and expanding. These are not the best bases for programmers and computational linguists. The brain is and will be the unsurpassed "computer" in humans.

History

Fifty years ago, MT began in England and the Cold War promoted it.

In the United States, the Defense Department needed translations of millions of words from Russian now. A Hungarian, Dr.Toma, was the right man at the right time: he bragged of a 300,000 word output per hour on a mainframe. There was no quality control – it was all confidential. Another company, Logos, translated Vietnamese. The keys were online bilingual glossaries, over one million terms in the case of Toma. Taxpayers paid for the enormous investment.

Later, the Mormon Church tried MT and abandoned it. The European Community uses a minor part of translations by MT (Toma's Systran).

Some private corporations have tried to profit from MT in the United States, in Europe (including Russia), and in Japan above all. I was told by the leading Japanese MT expert that there are so few human translators of Japanese that they must have MT.

Mystery, Misery or Miracle (TR 5)

The Crux of the Matter (Machine Translation, that is)

A machine cannot think (forget artificial intelligence for now).

MT requires an online bilingual glossary, a transfer mechanism, and human post-editing as a minimum. If you happen to need 30-year-old terms from Russian to English (updated in part), you are lucky because a large glossary already exists (Systran). In other languages, vendors offer general glossaries of from 5,000 to 100,000 words, but it is unlikely that your particular technical vocabulary exists online in the language you need.

So you run a count of words not found. A document with a corpus of 30,000 (the total amount of words) may include 14,000 words that are not found. Every word not found, including proper names, misspelled words, unknown acronyms, even verbs and pronouns, has to be researched (in dictionaries), input, coded and tested. The amount of time and money needed is prohibitive. Remember, the machine has rules, but does not know any words other than those in the original online glossary!

The transfer mechanism – grammar, word position etc. – is not as critical and sometimes quite good. Even post-editing is tolerable.

Probability, Statistics, Predictability – the Essential Elements

Assuming we work in private industry, the investment in one document is unreasonable. Assuming there is a guarantee that in the next three years there will be 300 documents with a similar vocabulary, then the ratio of investment to output would be favorable.

But, generally speaking, the private sector cannot predict such similar documents because the market and technology keep changing.

The Public Sector: Limits, No Competition or Profit Margins

Take the field of weather forecasting. The TAUM (Automatic Translation System of the University of Montreal) is a classic example. Meteorology is stable, limited and predictable. The French forecast follows the English one throughout Canada in 20 minutes, and almost without human intervention. A private company has contracted with the government. Great!!

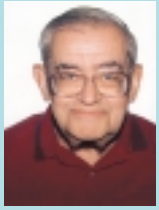
The problem is hidden. The government asked the TAUM group to design a similar system for aviation hydraulics. After 3 years, the MT people gave up. Human translation was faster and cheaper!! Even this limited field was too complicated.

Public sectors offer some great opportunities: The PanAmerican Health Organization has a first class MT system, called SpanAm (Spanish American). One language, Spanish, is spoken all over Latin America (except in Brasil). Health terms are relatively stable and documents repeat year after year. An outstanding example. But the technology is not available to outsiders. There have been disasters, like the "Eurotra" project for Europe!!

The Private Sector

Companies like Unisys, Xerox, Caterpillar, Siemens and John Deere have tried MT, but these are only a few compared to the thousands of global corporations. My recommendation is to stick with all kinds of CAT systems. There is little chance that private translation agencies could use MT. Think of consistent terms, fuzzy memory and the likes where the computer is your assistant, not your master.

In testing MT systems, beware of "prototypes" and edited texts. Sit down at the keyboard, try it yourself, and beware of salespeople!



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Controlled Language & Translation Memory

A Perfect Match to Save Translation Cost (TR 6)

by Daniel Brockmann

TC Forum 2/97 featured a very interesting article by Lehrndorfer/Mangold. In their article they focused on saving translation cost by using controlled language in combination with machine translation systems. In the present article, I would like to extend their approach to a recent phenomenon in the area of computer-assisted translation: the increasingly popular translation memory systems. First, I will briefly sketch the architecture of such systems, using MultiTerm and Translator's Workbench by TRADOS as an ex-ample. Second, I will give examples showing the positive impact of controlled language on the use of such systems. Third, I will give a brief perspective on future developments.

It goes without saying that controlled language makes it easier not only to understand a text, but also to translate it into another language, thereby reducing translation cost. This positive effect can be even more increased by the use of professional translation tools. By "translation tools", I do not mean machine translation systems such as Logos or Systran, but rather terminology database and translation memory applications. Typical examples of such tools are MultiTerm '95 Plus and Translator's Workbench.

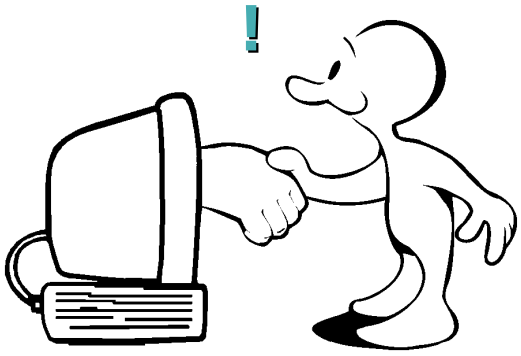
These systems assist the professional translator on three levels: terminology (active terminology recognition), sentence part (text search in translation memory), and sentence level (finding identical or similar sentences in translation memory, using fuzzy-matching technology). Controlled language, by definition, is characterized by consistent syntax and terminology. A translation memory tool, in combination with a powerful terminology database, can therefore be of valuable assistance in this context - helping to reduce translation cost, while at the same time making life easier for the translator.

To illustrate this, let's use some of the examples cited by Lehrndorfer/Mangold in their TCF 2/97 article. Let's assume a translator has to translate the sentence "Nie Magnesium-Teile mit cyanidisch verzinkten Teilen kombinieren". Let's furthermore suppose that the terminology database contains entries for the terms "Magnesium-Teil" (magnesium part), "cyanidisch verzinkt" (cyanide plated), "verzinkt" (plated), and "rostbeständiger Stahl" (rustproof steel). For the sentence above, the active terminology recognition will find the German terms along with their English equivalents. The translator can paste them into the target text with a few mouse clicks:

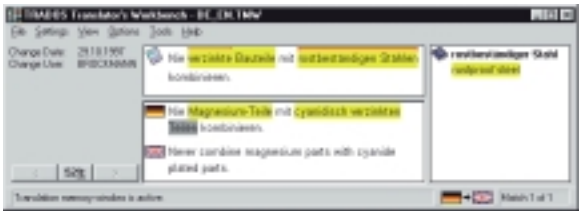
Figure 1: Active Terminology Recognition in a Translation Memory System

As a consequence, the effort going into the translation of this sentence is reduced considerably, thanks to the known terminology that the translator can use immediately for his or her translation.

Let's now assume that the translator comes across the sentence "Nie verzinkte Bauteile mit rostbeständigen Stählen kombinieren" at a later stage. Thanks to controlled language, this sentence is similar to the one he or she has already translated above. As a result, the translation memory will find a fuzzy match and generate a proposal based on the previous translation. The translator needs to adapt some terms in the new translation. However, since these terms are all in the terminology database, it only takes two mouse clicks to complete the new translation.



Technology



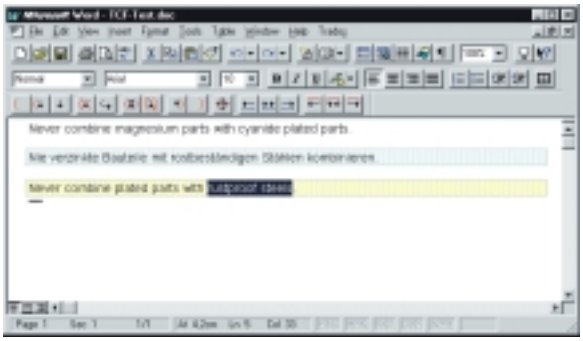


Figure 2: Fuzzy Matching and Terminology Support in a Translation Memory Tool

In conclusion, controlled language not only makes life easier with machine translation systems whose usefulness is still controversial, given the more or less tedious pre- and post-editing tasks. It also greatly enhances the use of translation memory and terminology tools. The more controlled a source text, the more efficient these tools will be in the translation process. In the medium term, they will also be adapted for source-text authoring. This means that the writer will be able to re-use his or her own material using an "authoring memory", thus increasing consistency even more in the source language.

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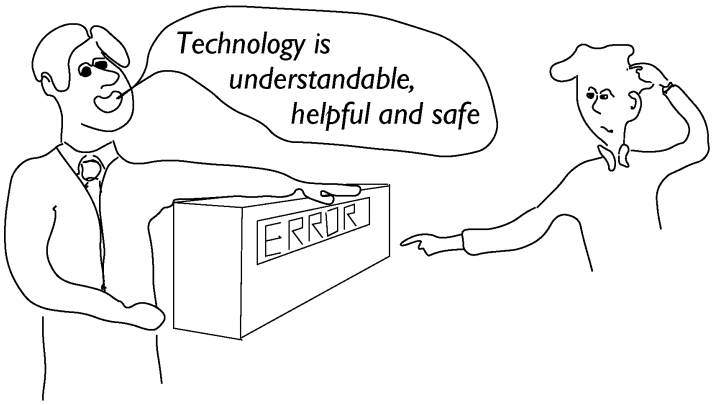
Is part of the responsibility ours? (RU 5)

by Ulf-L. Andersson



There could be a new job for technical communicators. An enormous one. To raise the general public's knowledge of technology and science. Today we see a broadening gap between the technological world in which we live and the general public's knowledge of its basic concepts. They meet technology in household equipment and home electronics that are difficult to understand and handle. A mistrust of technology is growing.

Making the machines that many people get in contact with easier to handle is a high priority. But we need also to raise the public's general knowledge so people can discuss and put demands on technology without unfounded panic and fear. But how can we do that?

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Interview Any User about Any Subject (RU 6)

by Charlene Strickland

Users and subject matter experts own corporate information, and the technical communicator collects this knowledge through personal interviews. To help each other improve this conversational skill, at COMTEC '97 we interviewed ourselves on five key questions. The following summarizes the participants' responses..

Why should the user talk to you?

To invite users to provide knowledge that informs your readers, you can try different approaches. In a small company, meeting with users is more informal: you can stop by and casually ask a few questions, rather than hold a more extended interview.

You can send an e-mail first, to explain what you're asking. This helps introduce you and the conversation you plan to hold. Then follow up with a face-to-face meeting, where the user can better explain the solutions to your questions.

Usually you will schedule interviews with experts for a certain time. At the initial contact, you'll explain why you need the information.

When you're speaking with an expert, tailor your conversation to that person. To establish rapport with a reluctant or skeptical source, try asking a specific question about a certain computer function. Or ask a general question on a broad function. Once the expert is talking, then you can pose more specific questions.

What do you do and say in the interview?

We discussed interviews with multiple experts, such as in the Joint Application Development (JAD) meetings popular in some software developer organizations. Most COMTEC '97 participants talk one-on-one with a single expert in a series of sessions.

Sequence your questions. Ideally, bring an outline of subjects or let the topics evolve naturally.

(I showed an example of a current project, where I've collected information from a team of subject matter experts. The experts had tried to document a complex procedure. I reviewed their initial effort, asked them follow-up questions, and then compiled a series of sentences that described the facts of the procedure. We then reviewed the sentences for accuracy.)

How do you adjust to the user?

You should plan the length of time you will need for a conversation. Give the expert an estimate of how much time you are requesting. If the person says he or she is "too busy," ask for only 10 minutes to discuss just three questions. Often when the person starts talking, those 10 minutes stretch into 30 or more. Specialists enjoy hearing themselves talk and appreciate an eager audience.

To encourage the expert user to talk, warm up with small talk about a neutral subject. You can learn something about a person by looking around his or her office – posters on the wall, family or pet pictures, or sports trophies. You may even chat about the weather before you start asking questions. Another approach is offering the expert food and/or drink, as some people relax more at the table.

To bond with users who are experts in a subject, avoid demanding answers. You can repeat answers to clarify what the user said. The "echo" technique, in which you repeat key words (also called mirroring or paraphrasing), can also help encourage the person to talk.

If you hear opinions that conflict with what you have heard before – either from this person or others – ask the same question a different way. Avoid threatening the expert.

When discussing a subject, you can use one of two approaches. Use ignorance to encourage the specialist to teach you, or establish yourself as knowledgeable. Several participants use the "expert" approach, challenging the specialist to share information.

You can convince a cautious expert to talk by mentioning how you represent the users, who seek the knowledge that the specialist owns. Remind the specialist that other users will read the documents you write, which is your version of the specialist's knowledge. Say you will route drafts to the specialist for review of content, but not your writing skills. To maintain a review schedule, deliver drafts in chunks rather than all at once.

Some participants expressed a more assertive approach to convincing users to talk. For example, if an expert doesn't communicate, you could contact his supervisor.

How do you screen what you hear?

We discussed the concept of paying attention through agreement. You can respond to the person by appearing to agree with what you hear. You provide this positive feedback by gestures, such as nodding your head. Smiling and verbal cues are also effective reactions. Silence is a helpful ploy, as an obvious pause can stimulate the expert to explain an answer further.

Useful responses to request elaboration include "Why?" (to ask for explanations of the concepts behind tasks), and "What if?" (to pursue all aspects of a topic).

Ask for the important points about a topic. Express curiosity by asking the expert to describe features of the product or service – especially those of interest to the reader.

How do you capture what you hear?

Taking notes can distract the specialist. If you have a good memory, just listen and record answers later, after you've completed the interview.

Recording formats can include the usual note-taking or tape recording. You can also use a MiniDisc digital recorder.

Should you obtain the expert's consent before you start taping? Must you obtain consent explicitly or implicitly? I researched this question in my references, and the legality of taping a conversation depends on the laws of the state (U.S.) or nation. Some journalism authorities recommend obtaining an explicit written release; others support the implicit consent of "on the record" communication.

You might ask the user to review your notes after you have transcribed them. Again, you will be requesting feedback on the accuracy of content.

We discussed waiting for the expert to share one final comment after you have officially closed the interview. Several participants recalled this revelation, where a person added a particularly valuable "nugget" of information.

Acknowledgment

My special thanks to the COMTEC '97 participants who contributed their experiences and opinions!

Strickland writes and edits computer software documentation, multimedia scripts, and World Wide Web pages. She is a member of the Society for Technical Communication and a freelance writer who has conducted thousands of interviews.

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Technical Communicators: How do you believe you add value to the development of

by Julie Fisher

In recent months, as part of my doctoral research, I have been interviewing technical communicators, users and developers of information systems to try and find out if in fact the work of a technical communicator is of value to those developing and using information systems. The interviews demonstrated clearly that technical communicators do add value. This was further confirmed in Paris where I discussed my work with technical communicators at the Comtec '97 conference. The following discussion encapsulates some of the comments from participants at Comtec '97 and the interviews I conducted.

Designing for delivery of informationvia the web

In the new era of electronically distributed information, the skills of the technical communicator will be in far greater demand than ever before. Conference participants stressed the importance of web page design for users. When a web site is carefully designed users will access it more frequently and will extract information from it more successfully.

Technical communicators can, using their skills, help in the design of more effective web sites. Two developers of information systems delivered via web sites were interviewed both said the contribution of the technical communicator improved the quality and usability of the site. For example with one system, the inclusion of a small moving picture of a butterfly flapping its wings, was used to draw attention to the help button. Usability tests had demonstrated that users had been unable to find the button, it had been difficult to see amongst other graphics on the screen. A redesign, by the technical communicator, of the screen and the inclusion of the moving picture resulted in more users finding and using the help button.

To measure the success or value a technical communicator adds to a web site one conference participant suggested encouraging visitors to the web site to comment on the site using email. On the second web system the developers decided they wanted feedback from users. The text for a button to seek users' comments was designed by a technical communicator. Originally the developers wanted the button to be labelled 'Exit', the technical communicator did not think this would work and suggested a number of alternatives, the developers still wanted 'Exit'. To settle the issue a usability test was conducted and the users' preference was for 'Before you go', the suggestion of the technical communicator.

From conference participants and those interviewed for my research, the message was clear, technical communicators should be involved in the design of web pages and web sites. Poorly designed web pages do not encourage users to return to that site and for businesses trying to do business via the web, this is important.

Information retrieval

Much discussion at the conference focussed on the more effective delivery of information. How, using the skills of a technical communicator information retrieval is improved, the quantity of material needed is reduced and communication within the organisation is made more effective. In one company the user documentation prepared by the technical communicator helped sell the new system to the users, the users instead of approaching the change with trepidation were looking forward to it. In the eyes of the developer the quality of the documentation was the reason for this. Two other developers said because the user documentation, written by a technical communicator, was of a high quality it helped sell the product.

One conference participant described how she had reduced a 120 page manual on how to use an email system to a cleverly designed finder wheel. Two circles joined together that when turned answered most of the users' questions. The marketing people loved it, they used it as an advertising tool printing more information about the product and the company on the back of the wheel and posting it to potential clients. The technical communicator in this case, was able to evaluate how information was to be used and so designed an appropriate solution, one that focused on users' needs rather than developers'. The issue of helping the user identify where

an information system? (RU 7)

information is found was an issue raised by a conference participant, for example ensuring icons are meaningful. Another participant added that technical communicators can ensure that information presented to users via the screen such as icons, buttons, tool bars etc, is obvious to the user so the user does not have to remember what to do next time that command or function is needed. This saves the user time and reduces frustration. One technical communicator interviewed described a problem she had when using a system she was documenting. She clicked on an icon that was a question mark assuming it was online help, it was not, it contained information about the product. The technical communicator drew this to the attention of the developers suggesting users would be confused. Unfortunately the developers were happy with the way it was.

A number of conference participants stressed the importance of having a technical communicator write information that is later translated. The quality of the translation is better because the text is clearer and more concise and therefore easier to translate.

The technical communicator as system tester

Technical communicators begin the usability process was the view of one participant, because they are evaluating and testing the system. Technical communicators are using the system the way the users will. Many of the developers and technical communicators interviewed identified the role of 'unofficial bug finder' as an important role. They stressed how this role added value in the development of an information system. There were many examples of the types of bugs uncovered by technical communicators such as running a function that crashed the system, finding the output of a process was incorrect because it gave the user the wrong answer, the new system clashed with other software that was running and subsequently crashed, clicking on buttons that did nothing and finding a screen saver that when it came on the user was unable to reenter their password so could not continue working.

If the technical communicator finds bugs at an early stage then they can be fixed, if not problems have to be explained away in the documentation. In finding the problems early the technical communicator saves the company money and time and generates a more positive response to the product from the users as well as making the product more useable.

Early involvement

When the technical communicator is involved early in the development process there is obviously more opportunity for them to contribute to the design and comment on issues relating to usability. In addition however, two participants at the conference mentioned the importance of having a technical communicator involved in writing the system specifications before the system is designed. One participant described how she was asked to document or describe the data base scheme in a way that made it clear. At first she was reluctant, expressing the view "what do I know about this?". Once involved she realised how important the process was because she was able to identify problems the users were likely to have with the design and point these out to the developers. Another person said that through their early involvement they were able to provide the users from the outset, with an overall perspective of the system. One of the developers interviewed did not find out until the system was being documented that the users' perspective of what they thought they were getting was quite different from the development team's perspective. This did not emerge until the technical communicator was talking with the users about the user documentation and found himself explaining to the users what the system was to do. The developer commented that next time he would bring the technical communicator in earlier because he saw the value they could add in helping users understand what they were getting.

How can value be measured?

This is a critical issue for technical communicators. How do we quantify the value that is added by a technical communicator's involvement early in the development of an information system? An obvious measurement tool is the reduced number of calls to the help desk (this was

How do you believe... (cont.)

mentioned by two of the developers I interviewed), but it is far from the whole story.

Measures suggested by Comtec '97 participants included:

- increased number of hits on a web site
- length of time spent on a web page
- users willingness or reluctance to pay for a web site
- reduction in the quantity of material or documentation required
- increased product sales
- reduced translation time
- increased repeat business (i.e. the developer's willingness to use a technical communicator again)

A clear message from the conference participants was that technical communicators today must become more proactive. The technical communicator must go out there and become involved wherever possible, sit in on meetings with the developers and talk to them about what they are doing and whether or not it will work from a user's perspective. This also came out through the interviews, the technical communicators who had the most input were those who became involved and were prepared to comment and provide feedback to the developers. The developers then became more willing to listen to the views of the technical communicator and sought their involvement more.

There are many other areas where technical communicators add value but these were the key ideas expressed by those at the conference. If you have examples of where you believe you add value we would love to hear from you, please write in so we can share them. I would like to thank those people who participated in ComTec '97 and came forward with their ideas. It was a lively and interesting discussion.

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Comment on "Consulting..." (CO 2)

by Marcella Lazzari

Question 1:

As far as I know, technical communication consulting is increasing in Italy, especially due to the requirements demanded by Machine Directive EC 392 on mechanical equipment. Manufactures are slowly becoming aware that they have to provide comprehensive technical manuals with their equipment.

In this area small manufactures are the most common, and their approach to technical communication consulting is often straightforward and very simple: "I need the working instructions for this machine. Help yourself and write them!... By the way we need them by next week."

This is what I heard from some consultants who provide such services.

Question 2:

I am sorry, I do not have much knowledge about other local manufacturers. I can guess that perhaps what could constrain such a market is the limitation that the complex Italian law puts on employment/short term contracts.

I am curious to know whether my opinions match with other Italian TC consultants.

Marcella Lazzari

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Centres for Excellence in Technical Communication: Where Are They? (ET 1)

by Ron Blicq

TC Forum NCP for Canada

One hears of "Centres for Excellence" in various fields throughout the world (the Mayo Clinic for medical research in Rochester, Minnesota, USA, is a typical example), but how often does one hear of a Centre for Excellence in Technical Communication? Yet they exist, particularly at universities that have fine programs in Technical Communication (I can think of The Netherlands, for example, and Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York – and there are others).

In a broader sense, there are also little pockets of special capability in technical communication throughout the world that we rarely hear about, because the people involved maintain a low profile and just get on with the job.

As an example, over the years I have watched technical communicators in my home city (Winnipeg, Canada; population about 640,000) quietly create an environment that is encouraging more and more manufacturers and product developers to use their services. Although there have been technical writers and editors in Winnipeg since the early 1950s, the major thrust started only six years ago, when the Society for Technical Communication and the Western Economic Diversification commissioned a study to determine the impact that technical communicators have on the quality of products and their documentation. (This resulted in the 1994 Report on Current and Desirable Standards for Technical Communication in Western Canada.)

The following year, Red River Community College in Winnipeg intuitively anticipated there would be a growing demand for technical writers and editors in the province, and so its Continuing Education Department inaugurated a certificate course in Technical Communication which is thriving today. At the same time, three technical communicators initiated an annual Technical Communication Institute (TCI), that every June brings top level specialists to the city to present four days of advanced courses on topics such as Project Management, Online Documentation, Usability Testing, Indexing, Designing Multimedia Projects, and so on. (Surprisingly, although the TCI was established to provide courses for local technical communicators, it now attracts people from all over North America and even as far away as Israel!) Are these, perhaps, the first steps toward creating a centre for excellence in technical communication?

I would like to hear about pockets of special capability in technical communication that exist in other cities and other countries. Probably the people involved also maintain a low profile, yet I think readers of TC Forum should be aware of what they are doing. Write to Hans Springer, our editor, or to me at:

Yet they exist, particularly at universities that have fine programs in Technical Communication.

Ron Blicq
rgi_ron@compuserve.com.

TOPIC: GRAPHICS/ ILLUSTRATIONS

A comment on "Using Cartoons in Technical Manuals...." (GI 1)

by Davis Lewis

.... Sometimes I think I'm the only one left on the planet, but I can't believe that's true. There must be others like me who feel that cartoons frequently devalue documents and the information they contain; who don't believe that there's anything wrong with a page of unadorned words (in the right context).

I'd love to know just how small a minority I belong to people who feel that TC-Forum with the mascot looks less like something you should take seriously and more like an instantly binnable bit of marketing matter.

David Lewis
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Comment on "To use or Not to use Word" (TO 2)

by Peter Ring

In the last issue of TC Forum Ulrich Thiele argues against MS Word. My pro's and con's are different.
I am a freelance technical communicator offering text, graphics, translation, consultancy, and teaching, and working for many different customers.
I basically use the tools my customer wants me to use, knowing by experience that insisting on using any other tools will normally lead to losing the customer within a very short time.

My primary tools are currently

- MS Word 7 (Win95)
- PageMaker 6.52

My experience is that each tool has its advantages and disadvantages, depending on the job.

I use MS Word 7 for...

- Documents with up to 100 pages to be printed in b/w internally. (That's about the biggest document I have made.)
- Documents to be offset-printed in b/w. Here, I normally deliver the document to the printer's photosetter as a PostScript .PRN file, and only with Postscript fonts.
- Color documents to be printed on a color laser-printer (digital printing).
- Documents where an internal writer/programmer/engineer will change it later on, due to current product changes and/or customer adaptation.
- Documents where fast & cheap production is essential. I find Word 7 is fast to work with for technical documentation, mainly because it
  - auto-numbers sequential procedure points, which we use a lot in technical writing,
  - has very good and fast table facilities (I use a lot of tables in technical documentation, both for data presentation and to place text and graphics side-by-side, and find that Adobe Table 3.0 is hopeless!),
  - accepts many graphic formats, incl. TIF bitmaps and Corel Draw vector graphics (using Insert/Image only!),
  - has easy cross-referencing facilities (another thing we use a lot in technical writing),
  - has (only a little clumsy) indexing facilities,
  - does spell-checking on-the-fly (which saves a lot of time!), and
  - has auto-correction (adn -> and, etc.).

For long Word documents, I never use the main/sub document feature. It's unreliable. Instead I link the graphics in the document without saving them. When the document is completed, I change it to relative path (using a Find & Replace procedure) for reliable file transfer. It's my experience that the problem with long documents occurs when a document needs the Windows swap-file (with my 32 MBRAM PC, it's when the document comes in at around 20-25 MB). By using the above procedure I have never had problems, even with many screen-grabs per page.

I use PageMaker 6.52 for ...

- Color documents to be offset printed.
- Manuals to be printed on paper and to be Internet-distributed as Adobe Acrobat files with hyperlinks.
- Documents where my customers use PageMaker internally for their other manuals.

Generally, PageMaker is a lot slower (probably 30% slower) to work with than MS Word for technical documentation. This has to do with

- its placeholder system which, whenever you add something inside the text, you have to check if the end has passed the placeholder's end-mark,
- how you set tabs (you have to go into a menu, and you can't see the result before you are out of the dialog box; there are also no TAB guide lines), and
- it's inability to let you make a screen-dump and paste it in. You have to save the work in a proper file format and then "Place" it after a lot of selection. Neither can you control its size by numbers, e.g. using a macro; you must hold down Ctrl and pull the corner. For a color publication it is even worse because you have to convert the screen-shot from RGB to CMYK before saving and placing it.

Peter Ring
M.Sc., B.Com.
Technical communicator, specializing in user friendly manuals

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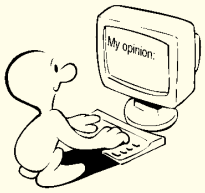
Letters to the Editor:



Dear Ron,

First of all I would like to introduce myself. My name is Marcella Lazzari and I am working in a subsidiary of a multinational company based in Italy, where I am responsible for the Technical Publications department. So I am not an independent technical communicator, but I am very interested in getting in touch with the TCs you mentioned in your article!

In our company English is the official communication language at all levels, and our manuals are written in English and then translated into the most common European languages, Italian included.

Our major problem is to find writers who have the following skills/competences:

1) a technical background
2) fluent English (written and spoken)
3) computer knowledge.

In Italy it is nearly impossible to find people who can fulfill all three requirements, and the major issue is the English language. Therefore we are using external consultants, whose mother tongue is English, to supervise our drafts.

If you have any names/ contacts (preferably in Europe, and especially in UK) of/with TC consultants who are interested in short-term contracts in Italy (from a few months up to a couple of years) please inform me. I would appreciate it.

Kind regards

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Please feel free to contact either the Editor or your NCP for any questions concerning TC-Forum.

Professional Events

TC-Forum provides information about upcoming events for technical communicators. These include conferences, seminars, calls for papers and other information of professional interest. TC-Forum accepts information about non-profit events only. Send information to the Editor (address see Impressum page 3).

15 - 16 January 1998

Terminology in Advanced Microcomputer Applications TAMA '98

Organized by the International Network for Terminology (TermNet), Supported by the International Information Centre for Terminology (Infoterm)
Latest developments in selected terminology-related (i.e. tools for terminology management, translation, text management and analysis, concordance and localization) will be presented and discussed. Individual demonstrations and mini-workshops offer a unique chance to get fully acquainted with innovative products, as well as services and publications.
Further information is available from TermNet.[1)]

14 - 15 May 1998
Luebeck, Germany

tekom Tagung

Technical Communication Conference

tekom, the German Society for Technical Communication, invites participants from other INTECOM member organizations to their next Technical Communication Conference and Exhibition. Presentations will be held either in German or in English.

Call for Papers:
Please send your proposals for short (30 min) or long (60 min) presentations with an executive summary and CV by 15 January to Ulrike Bornemann.[2)]
Further information to the conference and the exhibition are available from Michael Fritz.[2)]

Professional Events

21 - 22 May 1998
Language Technologies Institute, Carnegie Mellon University

CLAW '98: 2nd International Workshop on Controlled Language Applications

Call for Papers.
The 2nd International Workshop on Controlled Language Applications will be held May 21-22 at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. Since the first CLAW workshop, held at University of Leuven in 1996, there has been continued strong interest in the research and development of controlled language applications.

TOPICS OF INTEREST
Of interest are papers on all topics relating to the design, implementation and application of controlled languages.

IMPORTANT DATES
Deadline for submission: Feb. 16, 1998
Further details:
http://www.lti.cs.cmu.edu/CLAW98/
For more information contact
Teruko Mitamura [3]

3 – 6 June 1998
Winnipeg, Canada:

TCI 98

Third Annual Educational Institute for Technical Communicators

A strong educational program is being developed for the third Technical Communication Institute – TCI 98. Topics already planned are

- Usability Testing
- Online Documentation
- Indexing
- Incorporating graphics into technical documents
- Proposal writing

More topics are being prepared.
For more information contact the program coordinators:
Ron Blicq and Lisa Moretto [4], or:
http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/con@ed/partners/tci

11 - 13 September 1998
Cambridge, Great Britian

ISTC Conference '98 - Golden Opportunities

"Conference '98 celebrates the 50th anniversary of the ISTC. It is also 50 years since the transistor transformed electronics and gave us our first computers.
The ISTC will acknowledge both of these events in the programme of speakers, demonstrations and workshops that they are planning for the 1998 conference.

Call for Papers.
If you would like to contribute to the conference by giving a paper, demonstrating an aspect of your work, or running a workshop, please contact the ISTC office as soon as possible. The Conference '98 Committee look forward to hearing from you.

For further information contact:
ISTC, Conference Office [5]

23 - 25 September 1998
in Quebec, Canada:

IEEE/PCS IPCC 98

Technical Communication Conferences

The Professional Communication Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Enginners Inc (IEEE) holds an annual conference each autumn, in different locations across the USA and Canada. IPCC 98 will hold sessions in both normal conference presentation style and in the Forum "Idea Market" concept developed by Ulf Andersson of Sweden and pioneered by INTECOM. Some sessions also will be held in French.

The dates are September 23 to 25, 1998. For more information contact conference general chair Ron Blicq.[6]

June 2000 in the UK:

Forum 2000

At its second meeting in October 1997 the organizing committe fixed the theme for Forum 2000: **"Forum 2000 – Technical Communication Leading the Way**. As we enter the new millenium Technical Communicators will make their mark in history. Documenting technology is our responsibility and, with the advancement of tools and equipment in all aspects of life, Technical Communicators will have to sieze the opportunity to lead users into the future."

Further announcements will be published in TC-Forum and in www.TC-Forum.org as soon as they are available.

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