

Crowdsourcing and the professional translator

Jost Zetsche
International Writers' Group
jostzetsche@internationalwriters.com

Abstract

The recent emergence of crowdsourced translation à la Facebook or Twitter has exposed a raw nerve in the translation industry. Perceptions of ill-placed entitlement -- we are the professionals who have the "right" to translate these products -- abound. And many have felt threatened by something that carries not only a relatively newly coined term -- crowdsourcing -- but seems in and of itself completely new. Or is it?

Many within the translation industry have been highly critical of the linguistic quality of these endeavors. But despite the occasional linguistic hiccup, companies like Facebook and Twitter have created the "perfect" multilingual product: they encourage the participation of uniquely qualified users, and they turn users into part owners and enthusiastic ambassadors for their products.

While social network products and services like Facebook and Twitter that have access to user-translators make up only a tiny fragment of all potential translation projects (and failed projects like LinkedIn show that even this small percentage does not apply to all social network services), the autonomously organized "fan translations" of game products that have been going on for many years show that there is potential for more.

So what kinds of services can the translation industry offer to these ongoing and potential projects? As in any (perceived) crisis situation, this allows us to focus on the skills that truly distinguish us. These include areas like

- project and process management,

- technology deployment,
- terminology control,
- quality assurance,
- team leadership, and
- qualification assessment.

And not surprisingly, all of these are now proactively and successfully being marketed by some industry players to companies that are likely to crowdsource their translation projects.

What about the "newness" of crowdsourcing in translation? There are indeed many ways in which translation is and has been crowdsourced for a long time. These include

- projects such as the translation of translation portals like ProZ.com (where the user-translator and the professional translator happen to be identical),
- the translated data that statistical machine translation engines (such as Google Translate) anonymously collect and use to train their engines, and
- the translated data that is contributed to associations like TAUS or collected and distributed by the EU or the Canadian government to be used as translation memory and MT training data.

All these examples show that crowdsourcing permeates our industry, and it's up to our professionalism and ingenuity to turn this into our advantage.