Web 2.0 for interpreters and other facets of knowledge management

"Could you quickly check the Internet to see if the expression bikini zone really exists? Sounds a bit like a dodgy translation to me."

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With laptops omnipresent and WiFi increasingly available, this kind of question is becoming common in the booth. But what exactly does "quickly check" mean? Google it, see what comes up, and done and dusted? Yet I once spent half a day just trying to figure out if the 11 references I got for a specialised term in German came from original German pages or were simply false friends crashing the party.

In order to increase the probability of getting results from original-language sources, Google offers a language tool that allows you choose the countries of origin of pages to be searched. This is quite simple for German, Germany and Austria being the only exclusively German-speaking countries. But with English things get a bit more complicated... and then there is Spanish with its 21 countries. What is one to do? Go to the advanced search page repeatedly to target one country after another while keeping track of the results with mental arithmetic? Not something anyone would care to do anywhere, let alone in the booth.

I started wondering how to make this type of search easier and quicker, and that is how I decided to have a tool made to enable me to search (through a Google interface) for results from specific countries, or for Spanish and English, from pre-defined country groups. I christened it "Termprofile" and it can now be used without charge on www.termprofile.com. The name came to mind because in effect it is a "web-statistical profiling" tool allowing us to check a term on the Internet.

In addition to limiting your search to specific countries, Termprofile lets you make three queries in parallel in order to compare alternative formulations in a given language (always putting multi-word expressions in quotation marks) - e.g. bikini zone, bikini area or bikini line - or in different languages: is the Spanish línea del bikini used as frequently as the English bikini line? In addition, it allows you to discover if the 561 times that línea del bikini was found on Spanish sites is comparable to the 396,000 times that bikini line appears on English-language sites. To do so, you simply enter a common word (like cat in English or gato in Spanish) as a control, and Termprofile will calculate the "relative frequency," giving you an accurate measure for comparing frequency of use in countries of different sizes. The result is expressed as a ratio, such as 1:508, which in this case means that for every occurrence of bikini line, cat appears 508 times. For Spanish, the línea del bikini/gato ratio is 1:3,939, indicating that the "relative frequency" is only one-eighth that of English. It is also interesting to see that the Spanish expression línea del bikini occurs twice as often in English-speaking countries as it does in Spanish-speaking ones (with a relative frequency of 1:2413, i.e. also twice as high). In the USA, the relative frequency of línea del bikini is even similar
to bikini line (1:597), which leads to the assumption that the term is quite common among the Hispanic population of the country. With this information in hand, one easily comes to the conclusion that it would be worthwhile to look for a more commonly used alternative (by making an educated guess, looking for Spanish texts or just asking an expert and/or a native speaker), and it may then occur to us that in Spanish people simply talk about las ingles (the groin).

The Internet is obviously not a reliable linguistic corpus leading ineluctably to foolproof conclusions, and there are limitations to comparability (see the "info" section on Termprofile). But Termprofile at least makes searches a bit more reliable than they would be with Google, and saves time when it comes to checking the trustworthiness of a translation that sounds too literal or the existence of a term that the colleague sitting next to us has spontaneously invented. And it allows us to see how common an expression is in the USA as compared to the UK (or in Spain vs. Latin America). And once you start playing around with Termprofile, you'll find it almost as entertaining as Sudoku!

I've decided to share these ideas with colleagues not only to call attention to a useful tool, but also to illustrate how easy it is to use the Web 2.0, the so-called "participatory web." Maybe some of you will be spurred to come up with other ideas of applying it to our work. A discussion of such possibilities would be welcome, whether it be on conference preparation or follow-up, or even on-the-job use for ourselves and/or to help a colleague. There is already a number of web tools that might be helpful for interpreters (e.g. terminology extraction, corpus building based on key words that can be used to learn about a subject, automated identification of neologisms etc.). AIIC would be a good forum for the further exploration of the possibilities of Web 2.0 - and the resulting learning opportunities for interpreters.

Next: Is "information management" - or even "knowledge management" - all about computers?

The answer to this question is definitely no. The solution to the dilemma of having to know it all and not being able to know it all goes far beyond computer programs. I've researched the subject and identified various ways of ensuring economically efficient treatment of information and knowledge - and not all of them have to do with software.

Evaluation of one's own performance vis-à-vis one's information and knowledge work, which is one important element of management, will include the use of indicators (e.g. how often terms noted during preparation are used on the job, or preparation time vs. length of the interpreting assignment), as well as performance assessment (e.g. using a questionnaire). None of this is reliant on specific software; it can all be done with pen and paper.

Furthermore, there are different ways to optimise one's information work, such as:

- Systematisation (RSS feeds, key questions in preparatory briefings, structure of terminology, etc.).
- Widening or narrowing of searches (locally or on the Internet).
- Extraction of terminology and/or content.
- Systematic marking (e.g. of terms) for ease of use (importance, degree of memorization, need for revision, classification by subject/client, etc.).
- Ways to work faster (by electronic means, activation of passive knowledge).
- An informed selection of information to be used or committed to memory.

This last point (selection) is about strategy and covers the full scope of information and knowledge management activities. It means that we should consciously weigh the costs and benefits of the information available to us and of the knowledge we intend to add to our store - with the express purpose of deciding where to start, what to skip, and how to make the best use of limited time. For example, I might compare the price of a technical dictionary to how much time having it would save...
me and/or to what extent it would improve the quality of my work. How much effort will it require to memorize a list of terms a colleague has passed on, and what are the odds that said terms will actually come up during the conference? Will I be better off having the list (or part of it) in front of me in the booth or knowing it by heart? One thing is certain: just grabbing on to everything that comes one's way (by computer or on paper) is not the order of the day.

Many of the methods mentioned above are supported electronically. But no matter how shiny the tools or impressive the sheer mountains of information available, we must consider how we will approach the task. Software and Internet sites are worth little unless used with purpose. Here again AIIC could be a good forum for discussion. Approaches vary from interpreter to interpreter, and at the talks and seminars I give from time to time, I am always struck by the diverse expectations, habits and preferences I find. I've heard experienced colleagues talk about overflowing bookcases of glossaries stored in the basement, which they - understandably - do not want to get rid of. And I've heard others say they work in paperless offices. Some colleagues swear by Word for glossary preparation, while others prefer Excel or Multiterm. And I've seen how some technically astute interpreters have developed and use sophisticated systems like LookUp or Interplex.

Web 2.0 and information/knowledge management: two buzzwords that should mean something to us. Let's use them to cultivate our most important resource.

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**Recommended citation format:**