



Collaborative Translation

*The End of Localization Taylorism
and the Beginning of
Postmodern Translation*

By Renato S. Beninatto and
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Topic

Translation has traditionally been viewed as a craft. Highly skilled individuals miraculously convey the same thoughts, images, and emotions from one language into another. Their multilingual fluency ensures that the reader of the translated text misses little or none of the original's flavor. Of course, emotional connections don't matter so much when the discussion shifts from Tolstoy to technology – the installation instructions for a flat-panel television, instructions for using a touch-screen ticket machine or ATM, or a business news feed. For these uses, translation is about accuracy, timeliness, and volume.

Today, technical and business content increases logarithmically. Meanwhile, every company we talk to plans to add more languages and products to their global mix. Some companies will invest in machine translation to meet the growth in volume, velocity, and volatility. Others will look to centralizing translation memories as the solution. But most will look to their internal project managers and external language service providers to ramp up their productivity and throughput without jeopardizing quality.

Common Sense Advisory contends that the challenges of global business require a systematic re-thinking of the translation process. Think the web plus real-time collaboration as the avenue to higher throughput and consistent quality. How that plays out is the subject of this report.

Translation as traditionally practiced will be replaced by technology and process that allow a swarm of translators, editors, and supporting cast to concurrently work on a translation. Taking their lessons from the Agile development model of creating software in shorter periods and turn-on-a-dime flexible factories, the localization scrum will emphasize functional, timely translation as its goal. This model will work really well with smaller translation firms not encumbered by corporate procedures. It would be less successful inside larger LPSs or at publishers with their own translation teams.

The metaphor for traditional translation is a chain. It is only as strong as its weakest link. The longer the chain, the more weak links you will find. Think about a rope ([see Figure 1](#)). It draws its strength from its many strands. The failure of an individual fiber would not cause critical failure.



Figure 1: Chain vs. Rope in Translation Projects

Source: Flickr

Translation As It Always Has Been

In the antediluvian days of Translation As We Knew and Loved It, companies would translate, edit, then proofread (TEP). TEP is based on Gutenberg's printing requirements, where the author submitted the manuscript, someone typeset it, and somebody else reviewed the galley proofs as many times as necessary to make sure that no typos made it to the final print run ([see Figure 2](#)). Most translation agencies still operate this way – it works, it pays the bills, and everyone knows what their role is.

However, it does have a few basic flaws that lead to degradations in quality – and we all know that quality is the major differentiator for most translators:

- **Knowledge imbalance.** People downstream in the production chain usually have less information than people upstream. If the editor knows less than the translator, he is likely to introduce errors instead of correcting them. Another common problem is that the reviewer might not have received the same set of instructions as the editor. Either one reduces the quality of the output.
- **Lockstep rotation.** Each individual works on a task before handing it off to the next person in the process. While this model is very efficient as measured by class time-motion studies à la Frederick Taylor, it works better for building cars than for the more intellectual, asynchronous pursuit of translation. Translators, editors, reviewers, and production staff spend too much time waiting for the person ahead of them to finish.