Circumstances, challenges and consequences of a quality-geared and technology-aided process of translating: a case study

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1 Introduction

Throughout the history of translation studies, defining and quantifying translation quality has proved to be far from easy. Different views of what translation is all about have led to different concepts of translation quality and an assorted array of translation quality assessment and control possibilities. Whilst translation quality controllers find it hard to remain impartial and systematic when performing actions to improve the quality of the process of translating, those carrying out translation quality assessment exercises need to devise tailor-made, efficient and reusable assessment methodologies while still adhering to standardisation and normalisation efforts.

If the focus is upon language service units within medium-sized organisations, as is our case, we will have to necessarily look at those extra-linguistic, intra- and inter-departmental circumstances that undoubtedly play a role both in the process of translating and the translation as product in relation with the notion of quality. One of the main difficulties is that not everyone in the company acknowledges that producing high-quality multilingual documentation is strongly dependant on the involvement of several cross-organisation agents and not on the performance of the language service department alone.

Corporate language service vendors will need an up-to-date theoretical framework in order to reinforce their workflows, as well as to provide orientation to other potentially misinformed or obstructive agents, whose attitude towards translation should turn into a more proactive and constructive one.

2 The translation-mediated communication framework and translation quality

2.1 The translation-mediated communication framework revisited

The "translation-mediated communication framework" (TMC framework) could be considered as a "new wave" approach for assessing translation quality, paying special attention to the language industry's trends and needs. In so doing, it makes extensive use of empirical studies of technology-enhanced multilingual documentation production workflows.

Moreover, the TMC framework looks at translation as a broad, evolving concept of language facilitation and support, heavily influenced by new communication environments. The main idea behind this approach is that translation is an activity definitely serving the digital world. It recognises the impact of the Internet, which has lead to "new dimensions of language support traditionally based on print media and physical transport" (O'Hagan & Ashworth 2002).

The translator is conceived as an eclectic language professional, a linguistic and cultural mediator, characterised by the following key assets:

- Aware of cultural differences
- Capable of modifying the "message" to minimise the risk of communication breakdowns
- Resourceful enough and fully conversant with technological tools of the trade

We are particularly interested in the mediating, proactive and technologically-aware features of this translator profile, as it entails the requirements to be met by a language professional in a corporate setting such as ours.

The TMC framework is also satisfactory for us in that translation quality is seen as of vital importance. A dynamic and flexible notion of quality in translation is the underlying feature of every organisation that wishes to go multilingual. This is why translation quality is also intertwined with a varying degree of automation (e.g. in the production and maintenance of multilingual documentation), on the basis of the needs and type of language mediation and support.

In terms of quality assessment and control, this framework acknowledges the localisation industry's efforts to quantify translation quality and sees the end use of a translation as the main factor that defines its quality. In relation to this, the authors talk about the importance of "patterns" in a given translation assignment. The pattern of "information dissemination" differs from that of "information gathering" in that the former will most likely require a high-quality translation whereas in the latter a less perfect translation might be acceptable. This basic, though important, distinction runs in parallel with that of "sender-commissioned translation" (e.g. the company commissioning the translation requires its multilingual company website to be of high quality as this could be a key means of asserting its commercial potential) vs. "receiver-commissioned translation" (e.g. a scientist resorts to an online machine translation facility to have a foreign language article translated into his/her mother tongue; this user accepts a less-than-perfect translation as the machine translation output comes on the fly and at low cost or even free).

This dynamicity and flexibility, together with the technological input, could also allow for varying degrees of translation quality according to the stage of the document production chain we are in. In the next section, we shall try to shed some light on how and why we wish to embrace the TMC framework.

2.2 Translation quality in our scenario: incorporating agents

Following the TMC framework, our pattern would be that of multilingual information dissemination whereby the quality must be of a high level. We would also like to highlight that this common pattern also coincides with that of corporate knowledge transfer. In order to achieve that maximum goal, we have experienced the main challenge of creating and maintaining language resources (LR) that serve internal and external information and communication needs. We are particularly interested in fostering the idea of LR as valuable "knowledge owners" who regularly build up "corporate knowledge repositories" and the involvement of all agents in the process of constructing and keeping the latter. This is our challenge number one to ensure translation quality.

Defending our corporate language support position, we have encountered difficulties related to the rather widespread and unfortunate belief that translation quality is in the hands of the translator only. Will this leave us with the thorny task of being lonely quality controllers forever? Traditionally, translation has been perceived just as the perfect-ought-to-be end-product, not as a corporation-wide, ongoing cyclic process.

The first diagram below aims to convey a typical information dissemination pattern.

Fig. 1 Information dissemination pattern

Every organisation responding to such a pattern relies on an optimum information transfer to achieve the goals they pursue, e.g. obtain an outstanding commercial profit. Many companies wishing to pursue their activities on a global basis, in order to boost their commercial success outside their borders, decide to go multilingual without realising the preliminary need of having their corporate knowledge lying beneath their source language in place. The multilingual strategy is sometimes devised carelessly or too quickly. Or, even worse, the inhouse language service provider may be engaged in a tiresome battle against certain attitudes.

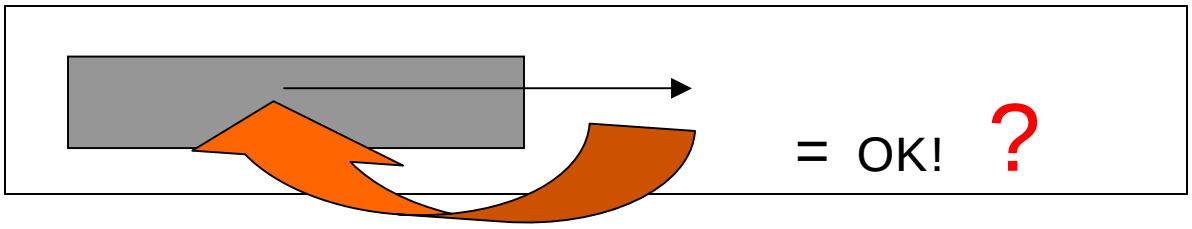

Fig. 2 Misconception about feedback in corporate information dissemination patterns from a language services' perspective

Figure 2 shows how the feedback about the organisation's multilingual documentation production is expected to come exclusively from outside. Therefore, feedback is solely understood as a commercial reaction from foreign partners and customers. In other words, "if our customers keep coming back, that means that there is no problem with our multilingual documentation". Perhaps it is true that the language service department are doing a good job, but it might also be true that they are struggling to produce high-quality texts in several languages due to lack of cross-organisation participation in the cyclic creation, maintenance and exploitation of corporate language resources.

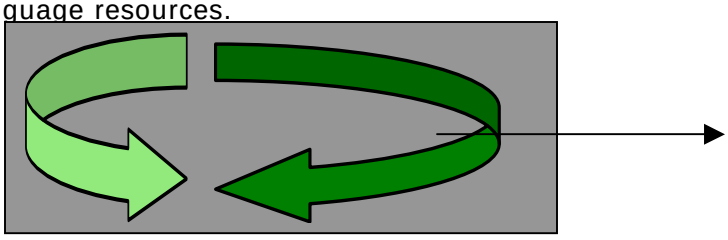

Fig. 3 Pattern of corporate information dissemination
with two different forms of feedback originated within the organisation

Figure 3 proposes a different signification for the concept of feedback, this time coming from within the company. Corporate multilingual documentation workflows, like ours, would then benefit from a multi-layered input involving multiple agents within the organisation. The next section focuses on the modalities of this workflow.

We have already embraced the TMC framework as a valid one for our purposes. The technological component is already a priority for us as is the construction and sharing of self-made language resources that are meant to function as corporate knowledge repositories. As the information about the organisation, together with that of the outer world, is of cyclic nature and under constant development, a proactive attitude across the organisation is necessary to retrieve valuable corporate knowledge even in static compartments, which is then difficult to trace, update, manage and translate by the different agents or users.

"Workflows that incorporate computer-human interaction and user specifications produce the best results" (Melby 1995): This maxim could be used to raise awareness across heterogeneous agents of an organisation. In our case study, we will see that pro-activity starts off at the very end of a multilingual production chain, at what traditionally is considered to be the entity holding the sole responsibility for offering a high-quality translation, the language services providers. Yet this department will try to transform the potential users of their major corporate language resource, so far without much interest in and as a means of access to it, into active users, that is, involved enough in the production process that necessarily encompasses knowledge construction and sharing beforehand. In other words, a quality-geared corporate knowledge transfer materialised by means of multilingual documentation production, requires a proactive knowledge sharing across the corporation in the first place.

3 Our case study

Our reference in terms of practical translation experience is represented by an in-house language services department working exclusively for a holding company based in Zurich and its subsidiaries. These companies are active at international level and release their business-related documentation in German, English and French. The members of the language services department are multi-task professionals; in other words, they assume the role of "translator-terminologists".

3.1 Technology and self-created language resources

For their work in this "translation-mediated communication environment" (TMC environment), the translator-terminologists team introduced computer-assisted translation (CAT) technology; more specifically, translation memory (TM) technology. In 2001, the team started building up from scratch its own electronic language resources, such as a multilingual terminology database (TDB). The use of TMs resulted in a better use of the available resources: The team could translate repetitive texts in less time and subsequently invest some time in terminology work.

3.1.1 A tailor-made terminology database

From the very outset, the translator-terminologists team aimed at building a corporate knowledge repository that, in future, would be made available to other

users within the company. In a preliminary phase, the team took some time to decide on the final TDB structure. In this process, they addressed specialists in the company to obtain some advice as – for instance – to the subjects to be included for term classification. They also exchanged opinions with other experienced colleagues to ensure that the right choices in terms of general database modelling were made.

It was only after having agreed on few but important rules on how to establish format and content consistency that the team actually started entering terms in the TDB.

3.1.2 The TDB as an instrument for promoting corporate language

In a constant expansion process since 2001, the TDB – incorporated in a well-established software – has become a repository for terms closely related to the company's business activities. All three database languages (German, English and French) are handled on an equal footing: Each entry must contain all mandatory term and designation attributes in all three languages to be regarded as completed.

During the initial stages of terminology practice, priorities were set as to which terms and/or designations had to be entered at first to make sure that the most relevant terms of the company's business areas would be represented. Especially names and/or expressions designating new products and/or services offered by the company, as well as any term or expression related to them were (and are) given top priority for entry in the TDB. As of end 2003, the number of validated entries amounted to about 2,000.

Four data categories were defined at term level, for each of which a number of predefined attributes (data elements) can be selected.

The following two types of data categories were defined at designation level:

- Data categories with predefined data elements such as: gender (for German and French language), designation type (preferred designation, synonym), designation form (abbreviation, phrase) and geographical use.
- Data categories with variable data elements such as: designation source and definition (both mandatory attributes), context (example of use of the designation) as well as note (both optional attributes, to be entered if relevant).

Several cross-references are established to either link validated entries to other related validated entries in the TDB or to previously defined bibliographical codes. These codes are entered in a model aptly designed for entering the most frequently used bibliographical references.

Fig. 4 Example of validated and completed terminological entry

3.1.3 Instruments for TDB management

For managing the TDB, different maintenance tasks are to be performed regularly, such as: creating a backup file of the TDB in TXT format; adapting the TDB structure if necessary; continuously updating a list of all new entries in XLS format for statistical purposes.

As a matter of fact, statistics monitoring is one of the basic instruments used to keep track of the "growth" of the TDB within a given timeframe and budget. Depending on the foreseeable translation workload (as far as planning is possible), the translator-terminologists team agrees on terminology targets on a yearly basis. Different parameters may be applied, i.e. the individual contribution in quantitative terms (minimum number of entries of all types to be entered and/or validated by each team member) or terminology planning (setting priorities as to the types of entries to be entered in order to ensure a "balance" of terminology data;

extracting/processing existing terminology from glossaries etc. in order to import it in the TDB etc.).

Last but not least, targeted measures are taken to increase the added value of terminology at company level and, more specifically, of the TDB as a major contribution to corporate language. This is achieved either specifically via *ad hoc* presentations or simply as part of "small talk", when the occasion of exchanging know-how and ideas with colleagues of other departments presents itself.

3.1.4 Handbook for terminology work with the TDB

Since the translator-terminologists team aimed at developing a very "consistent" TDB, a kind of "protocol" was drafted at the very start, defining the most important aspects regarding the TDB model as well as the content and format of the different data categories and data elements. Soon enough, the protocol was abundantly enlarged and became a handbook: the reference document *par excellence* for terminology work with the TDB.

As a compendium of all the knowledge continuously acquired in terminology practice, the handbook proved to be a very efficient tool for knowledge transfer within the translator-terminologists team. It can be regarded as a "work in progress" since it is regularly updated and/or enlarged. Any new aspect or case related to multilingual terminology not yet covered is immediately added in the relevant chapter or – if a better solution to deal with a specific problem is believed to have been found – the relevant section in the handbook is replaced by the description of the new approach.

The handbook for terminology work has both descriptive and prescriptive character. It is "descriptive" because it describes the use and scope of all data categories and data elements, the general procedures for entering terms etc. It is "prescriptive" because it also prescribes the use of certain terms and, in particular, certain designations in order to ascertain a specific corporate terminology: Some designations carrying certain attributes can be defined as synonymic or can even be ruled out whereas others can be defined as preferred or as the only designation accepted (which is indicated accordingly in the terminology entry).

In order to highlight these practical aspects of terminology practice with the TDB, the handbook is richly illustrated with some 108 extracts of validated entries and 9 complete entries. Furthermore, a chapter section provides some useful advice on how to handle the most frequent problems of multilingual terminology work with the TDB, e.g.: overlapping or partial equivalence of the term’s meaning in the different languages; terminology "gaps"; accepted spelling for a specific term for consistency reasons; accepted non-synonymous designations for signifying a specific term for usage reasons; mixture of different language registers to signify specific terms etc. Another chapter section is devoted to the applied methodology, such as the procedure for entry validation and TDB management and planning. Finally, the handbook contains a number of useful annexes: list of language codes, list of bibliographical codes, accepted format of internal and external publication titles and details used as a source in the TDB entries.

3.2 Measures aimed at enhancing translation quality

Established measures in translation practice are constantly used for ensuring translation quality.

As far as internal quality control is concerned

- translated texts are proofread by another member of the translator-terminologists team.
- terminology entries are proofread twice at different stages of their processing (the first proofreading focuses more on the language quality control whereas the second particularly examines the consistency of the entry at entry level and at the level of the entire TDB; this is done by means of checking the relationships of the data in the relevant entry with other related entries).

For cases in which an external quality control becomes necessary (e.g. for representative texts such as annual reports, marketing brochures, software releases etc.), a "consultation procedure" has been implemented by the translator-terminologists team, which means that the translated texts are submitted to specialists who are native speakers of the corresponding languages. Unfortunately, this procedure has not yet been included in the ordinary schedule for document production and, consequently, time constraints sometimes prevent its application. Similarly, if uncertainties exist as to the meaning and/or scope of a term or designation, the translator-terminologists team consults specialists of the relevant field before entry validation.

Moreover, particular attention is given to continuous further training either on specific language areas (terminology, localisation, Internet search techniques for translators, advanced training on CAT technology etc.) or on company-specific business matters (know-how acquired by attending external or internal courses or even by interacting and getting acquainted with other company departments).

3.3 Challenges in translation work

Translator-terminologists need to have excellent time management skills to cope with the most frequent challenges in their professional lives: tight deadlines, limited resources (efficient outsourcing) and last-minute changes.

Likewise, present-day language professionals also have to come to terms with lack of controlled authoring at source. Although source text authors are experts in their specific area of competence, they do not necessarily have a natural writing talent and may not have received specific training in technical writing. By and large, this is at the origin of the very common problem of terminological inconsistency: inadequate use of terms and/or use of inadequate and even non-existing terms.

Moreover, there is hardly ever undivided consensus on the specialists' side with respect to the content of source documents. The specialists themselves become aware of this problem when reading the translated texts submitted to them within the framework of the consultation procedure mentioned above. In many cases, they disapprove of the wording or a statement in general and make suggestions that result in a total shift in meaning of the relevant parts when compared to the source document.

Last but not least, the translator-terminologists team represents the last link in the document production chain (or workflow) currently applied.

3.4 Multilingual document production workflow

Multilingual document production currently consists of a processing sequence involving many units within the company, as shown in figure 5.

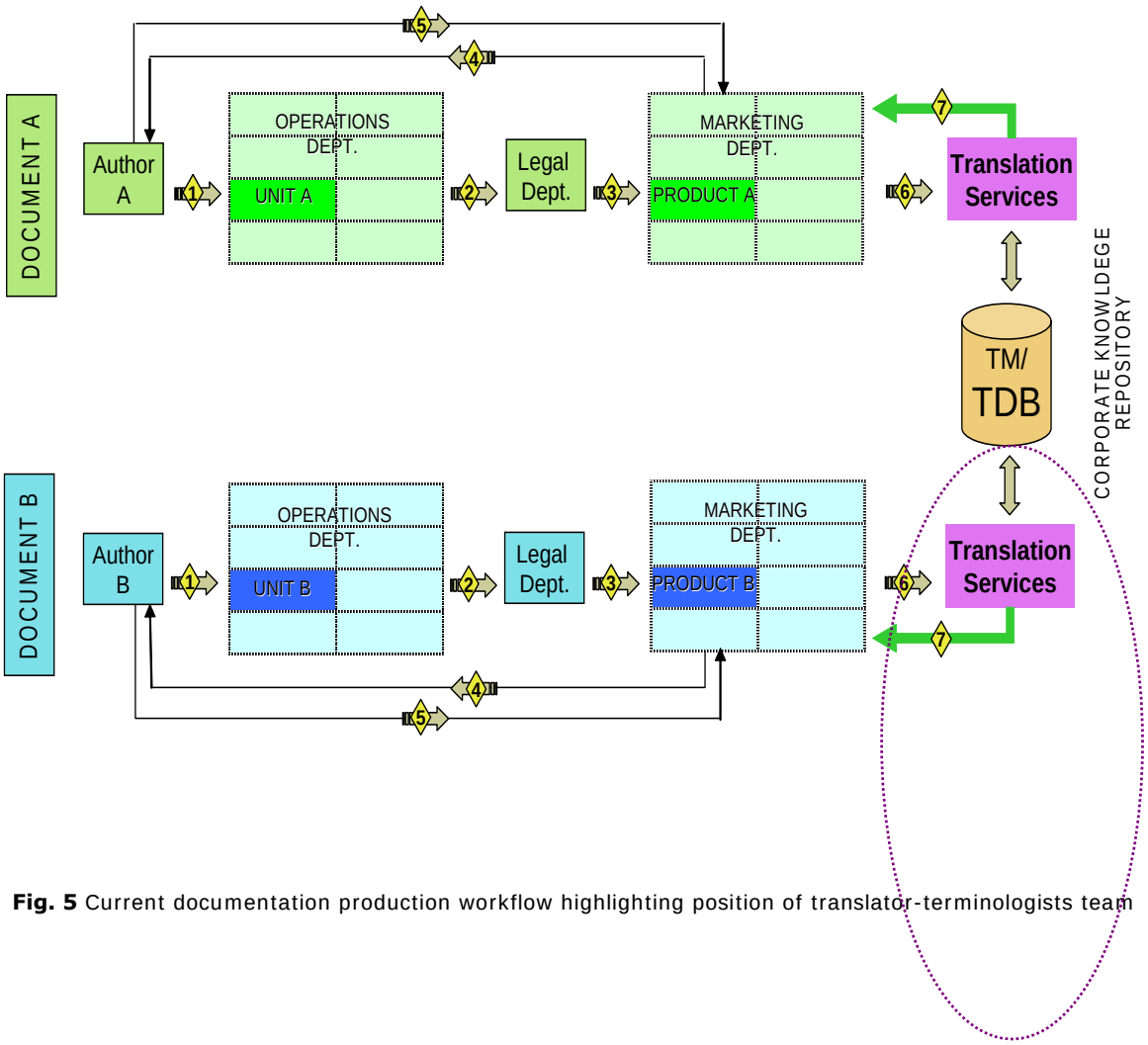

Fig. 5 Current documentation production workflow highlighting position of translator-terminologists team

As an example: After having received input from several sources, the author drafts a text and passes it on to the unit within the department specialised in the product and/or service for which a deliverable (text for the Internet or to be distributed on paper etc.) has to be published in the three company languages. The workflow continues with the involvement of the legal department, followed by the unit within the marketing department responsible for the given product and/or service. Frequently, the unit within marketing gets back to the author to clarify points and further finalise the source document. Only then, the translator-terminologists team receives the translation order. The numbers highlighted in figure 1 are meant to illustrate all the steps involved in this process.

As previously mentioned, the team uses TMs for carrying out the order and always refers to the TDB: a structured "corporate knowledge repository" that helps them to ensure output consistency.

Looking at the present situation, the following can be observed:

- Most authors have no specific training on technical writing, i.e. basic controlled language procedures are not yet applied.
- The self-created TDB is only available to translator-terminologists.
- Staff, including the authorship apparatus, are in general not aware of translator-terminologists' "knowledge ownership" and, therefore, authors do not consult them for terminology-/language-related issues.

3.5 Knowledge sharing and transfer: a vital element for enhancing the quality of multilingual deliverables

We need to demonstrate organisation-wide that, in a translation-mediated communication environment, the quality of multilingual deliverables does not exclusively depend on the output from language service providers.

Appropriate input at source (precise wording, large consensus as to the content of source documents, consistent terminology) accelerates the whole document production workflow and helps to improve overall quality of the company's deliverables.

Feedback regarding the output from translator-terminologists (translated texts, terminology data) has to be acknowledged as part of the document production workflow.

3.6 Possible measures for optimising the document production workflow

Sharing and transferring knowledge is crucial for ensuring quality in a TMC environment. The TDB presented in this case study is a valuable corporate knowledge repository and should be made available to all staff members.

As a matter of fact, the translator-terminologists team strives for the implementation of an Intranet solution for the TDB. To do so, a convincing credit demand, including a very detailed ROI analysis, has been prepared and submitted to management.

The TDB developed by the translator-terminologists would largely contribute to promote corporate language and, thus, strive for a best practice in knowledge management.

Other measures related to the workflow itself should be introduced:

- Consultation of specialists as part of the ordinary document production schedule for the most representative multilingual deliverables (annual reports, releases, services brochures etc.)
- Direct exchange between authors and translator-terminologists at an early stage of the document production on a case-by-case basis (e.g. if new products/services are launched for which no data to refer to is available etc.)

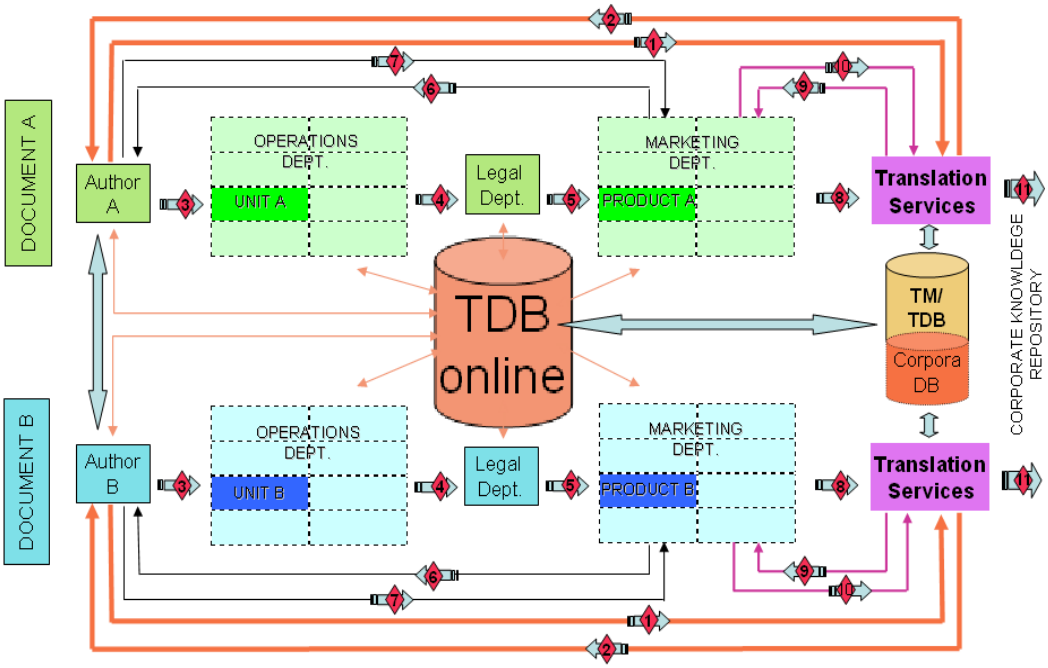

Fig. 6 Optimised document production workflow (enabling all necessary relations among corporate knowledge agents)

Figure 6 represents the optimised document production workflow that we have in mind. With an even better equipped corporate knowledge repository at our end in the form of a corpora database, the TDB – main corporate language resource – made available online to all our staff members independently of function. Hence, at the core of our corporate operations system, none of our multilingual knowledge would get lost along the way.

The numbers highlighted and the varied arrows convey the envisaged steps and necessary relations among the so-called corporate knowledge agents. Needless to say, this approach would allow streamlining the multilingual document production, its procedures being agreed upon by all parties involved. Corporate language and culture would consequently be fostered and become more transparent to all.

This case study proves that better quality results can be achieved when human and technological forces are strategically and realistically joined, even if there might be a number of obstacles along the line.

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