

TRANSLATION ENVIRONMENT FOR MODAL VERBS

Contextul de traducere pentru verbe modale

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Abstract: We are interested in a rather problematic issue, namely the translation of some English modal verbs into non-Indo-European languages, such as Romanian or Hungarian. The research is supported by a database, which is fed into the translation memory and term base of MemoQ translation environment. The conclusion of the paper discusses whether it is worth creating a database for the English modal verbs in order to speed up the translation process.

Keywords: modal verb, translation, MemoQ, translation environment

Translation environments

There are many views regarding the future of translation (industry), but – in our opinion – one of the most sobering ones belongs to Gouadec (2007: 109):

The PRAT or Pencil and Rubber-Assisted Translator is clearly on the way out, though there are still a few specimens at large. The Computer-Assisted Translator has taken over.

Whether we like it or not, a new chapter seems to have arrived in the history of translation industry and this is marked by switching to computer-assisted translation. Translators have to be computer-literate in many ways, starting from computer hardware and software. The development of computer hardware led to the development of computer software as well, and nowadays we even talk about cross-platform software meaning that it can run on Windows, Linux and/ or Mac operating systems as well.

More and more translation environments appear (e.g. *MemoQ* from Kilgray), older ones are ‘refurbished’ (e.g. *SDL® Trados™*), new features are added, such as quality assurance, plug-ins (to online resources). We tend to think that the popularity of translation industry results from at least three main reasons:

- The unifying Europe: The European Union has twenty-three official languages¹ and the

¹ Source: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/whoweare/index_en.htm, 13.04.2010.

Directorate-General for Translation (DG Translation) translates texts for the European Commission in all these possible combinations, 506 in all (Gál 2011, Imre 2010). This means around 1750 linguists and 600 support staff and in 2008 alone they translated more than 1,800,000 pages;² however, they cover only certain areas of translations.

- Globalization: products are constantly filling up the global market and local authorities expected the producers to have their product descriptions translated into local languages. This resulted in a translation.
- Last but not least we can mention the immense potential of the internet. For example, the free Google Translator (cf. Boulton) provides online translation for more than 50 languages.

Thus it seems logical to check the possibility of creating databases with the help of translation environments, and our choice was *MemoQ* provided by Kilgray. As any present-day translation environment, *MemoQ* contains a translation memory (TM), which memorizes segments (basically full sentences), a term base (TB) for words, expressions to be saved one by one by the translator while translating, but both TMs and TBs can be added from external sources as well or previous translations as well. The next section presents some of the results.

Translating modal verbs

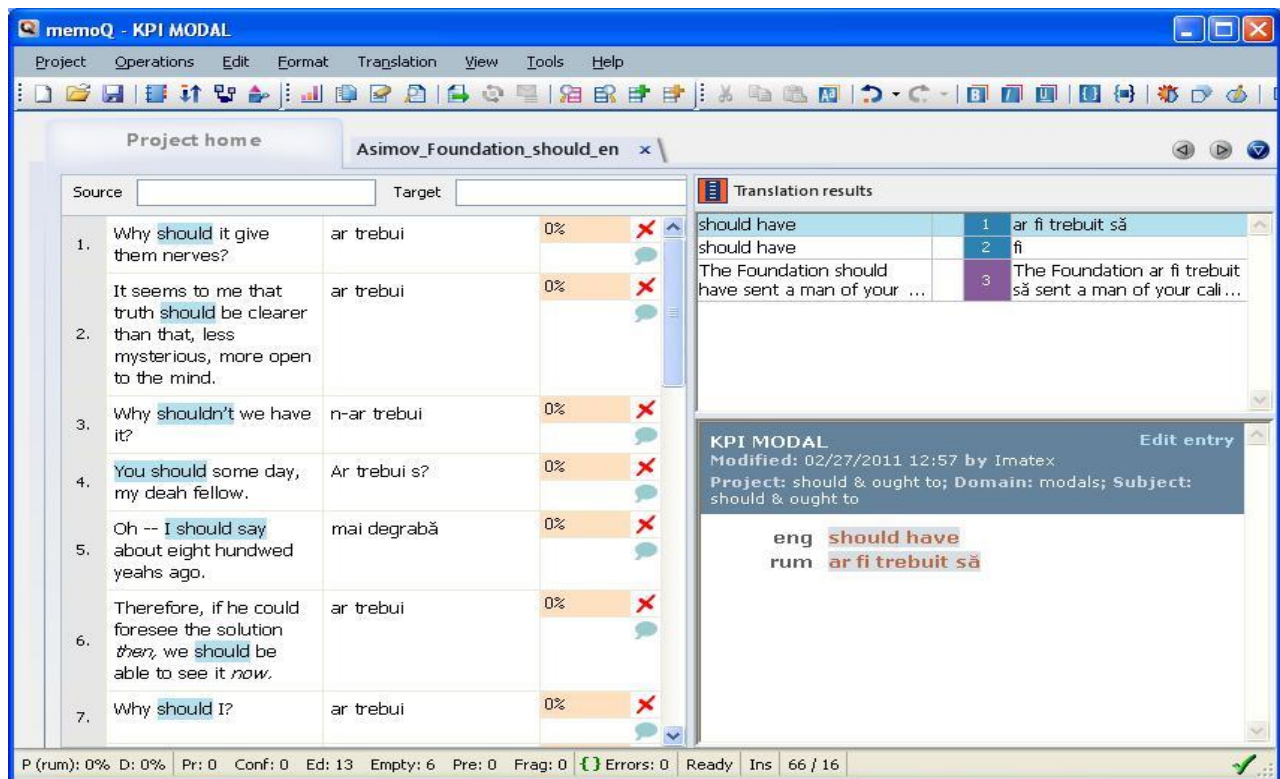
We investigated whether it is worth creating a separate database for the English modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, ought to, need, dare*) in present/ future and past, including negative and interrogative forms as well. More than 1,000 instances were collected from one main source (Asimov's *Foundation*); after the theoretical background (e.g. Palmer 1968, Palmer 1990, Greere-Zdrengea 2000) we drew the conclusion that from the translator's point of view epistemic, dynamic and deontic modality is less important than all the translation possibilities of each modal verb.

Seemingly, there are modal verbs, which are worth inserting into a term base as their translation is easier to predict, such as *must* (Imre – Keresztesi 2011), *should* and *ought to* (Imre 2010a). In case of *must*, 64% of the cases were correctly predicted compared to the Romanian

² Source: http://www.translationconference.com/2009_eoad/JancsiB_HU.pdf, 12.03.2010.

translation (Stoian), if we start from the root *trebui*, which can be easily completed with extra letters (-e, -a, -t). As for the Hungarian, 48% of the cases coincided with the Hungarian translation (Nagy), but this is basically *kell*, which is a rather short string of keys. This leads us to conclude that creating an English-Romanian database for modal verbs is much more worth the effort than creating an English-Hungarian database, where the possibility for variety is much higher (cf. Indo-European languages and Finno-Ugrian languages). Although many grammatical possibilities were taken into consideration, around 75% of all occurrences of *must* are combined with the infinitive and when creating a database we should only focus on these cases (cf. Recski 2002). Furthermore, according to Benő (2011), it is also important to differentiate types of texts, as legal documents contain fewer possibilities for modal verb translation than fiction.

Results for *should* are also encouraging (Romanian *ar trebui*, Hungarian *kellene*), except for cases when *should* is combined with conditionals (*If you should ...*) or *should* appears in mandative subjunctive (*demand, order, command, etc. + should*), as it is translated with a conjunction (Romanian *să*), or the verb is in imperative (Hungarian).



1. Should in MemoQ

Less satisfactory results are obtained when the English modal verb has many meanings, such as *can*. Although *can* is one of the most used modal verbs (almost 20% in our database, cf. Imre 2011b), due to its meanings, there are many possibilities for translating it into Romanian. Our initial enthusiasm when having discovered that ability, possibility and permission may be expressed with the same root verb (*a putea*) dropped when we observed that there are many variants: *pot, poți, putea*. As for Hungarian, around one third of *can* is completely lost in translation, around one third preserves the meaning in the suffix (*-hat, -het*), and only around one third of all cases preserves the meaning in separate words, which are rather varied (*képes, tud, tudom, tudok, tudsz, tudod*, etc.).

Conclusion

According to the *MemoQ* guide, when technical texts are involved, up to 70% productivity gain may be expected in case we have a very good TM and TB. However, they admit that in case of literary texts, the percentage drops to 10-30%, which is natural as the richness of languages is best expressed in case of fiction. Our initial aim was to map which English modal verbs are worth putting into an English-Romanian or English-Hungarian term base, and at this stage it seems that occurrences of *should, ought to, must* may offer the expected ratio if the database includes as many cases as possible (idioms, stock phrases, negative forms, past forms). The modal verbs *can, could, may, and might* have much richer possibilities when translated, so we doubt that the expected gain in their case will surpass the predicted 10%. However, we do not say that the term base is not important to create in these cases, as TBs offer further research options, such as standard translations versus creative ones.

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Source texts

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