

Wiki Translations

A First Attempt at a Draft, by Viktor Horvath

Version 1.0

ViktorHorvath@gmx.net

November 2nd, 2004

<http://www.steckenpferde.de/wiki-translations/>

1 Motivation

If you have learned foreign languages at school and you're not actually using them, you might want to read a bilingual book sometimes. Or you just want to read a translation, if you don't know the original language. Let's say, you want to read a Latin classic whose author has been dead for nineteen centuries. One would suppose that nowadays, in our modern society of knowledge, getting a bilingual version, e.g. Latin/German is not a big issue. However, you might find that a translation or bilingual version of your requested book

- is out of print
- has never been published so far
- is too expensive
- is badly translated.

Of course, there might be yet another problems; for example, cheap good translations may exist, but the characters are too small for you to read them conveniently.

On the other hand, the original has been passed into the public domain for ages. Assumably, there are a lot of people who have learned the original language at school and would like to practise their knowledge, but who have no time to translate a whole book. By translating only parts of it into their native language, they could actually exert humanism instead of only having learned its methods. At the moment, translations and originals are

helplessly scattered through webpages. Using modern technology like the Internet and the Wiki system¹, looking at the marvellous success at the free encyclopedia Wikipedia², why shouldn't it be possible to create a central place for translations which can be downloaded free of charge for the benefit and education of the whole mankind, made by the whole mankind?

A lot of things are necessary for this pleasant vision. In the following, I'll try to give a first, however far from complete impression of what has to be done. I'm only a German student living in Paris for one year, annoyed by the missing availability of bilingual books. I don't have neither the time nor the knowledge for creating a new version of the MediaWiki software; still I hope to find people who like this idea and can help to realize it, be it as part of Wikisource³, be it as a new project. I once made some postings to the Foundation-L mailing list⁴ and will include some of the reactions, which can be found in the list's archive for October 2004.

My first thought was about Latin and Ancient Greek, but the principle can be used to translate any language, of course.

2 What the wiki has to provide

2.1 Entering the original source

Obviously, the source has to be uploaded in the system, be it by taking over some Gutenberg content, be it by typing in old editions which have passed in the public domain. This is necessary for creating a bilingual version as well as for having one common basis for translating.

2.2 The translator's interface

For translating as for viewing (which is the same thing in a Wiki, of course), you need at least a two-pane design: On the one side you read the original, on the other side you read or write your translation. The Perseus Project⁵ which provides lots of Latin and Greek originals and English translations, displays always only one paragraph per page. It would be desirable to see

¹<http://meta.wikimedia.org>

²<http://www.wikipedia.org>

³<http://www.wikisource.org>

⁴<http://mail.wikipedia.org/mailman/listinfo/foundation-l>

⁵<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>

optionally more text, e.g. a whole chapter or even the whole book, if it's not too large for one webpage.

An obvious, but for the first step not necessary extension would be the availability of a three-pane design, more for reading than for translating.

2.3 Footnote management

Sometimes, there will be different versions of the source, and of course, lots of annotations to the translation. The discussion on the above mentioned mailing list concentrated mainly on this aspect, and I will summarize some of the results. The discussion page which is available in the current Wiki system is not sufficient; a more advanced handling of footnotes is needed, like the one \LaTeX provides. Furthermore, while in a text a footnote is always associated with a point in the text, in electronic media like a webpage we could go new ways, like associating a footnote to a range of words to clarify what the footnote exactly refers to.

2.4 Edition management

There will never be *the* one and only translation of a document (and that would be a horrible idea). Some people will prefer a translation that is close to the original for comparing both texts, others will like one more adapted to the target language. Furthermore, there will be people who translate several parts of a book, so these parts should be viewed together. Therefore, the Wiki has to provide a mechanism that several versions of the same text can coexist. The reader could say, for example: "Give me the translation made by Jim, where possible; where there isn't one, take John's; and if neither of them has translated a part, show me just something available." This way, a continuous version can be produced.

You could set up one level between the translators and the readers by introducing editors. An editor can join several fragments to build a coherent translation, possibly translating himself some small missing part. Then the reader is not forced to assemble the parts manually, but he can fall back on the "close-to-original version, edited by William" or on the "free version, edited by George".

2.5 Having a nice output

One thing which could be a unique feature of such a Wiki is the possibility to create a real bilingual PDF. Such documents are almost not to be found elsewhere in the Internet. If the reader has selected his preferred translation, he could click on a button “Create a PDF”, which supplies him with a real bilingual version, ready to be printed and read peacefully offline. The actual conversion could be based entirely on free software, and it can happen on the server’s side (having a script feeding the source in PDF \LaTeX) or, if the server would be overloaded, on the client’s side (the server just sends the source; the user has to feed it into a program running on his computer).

Finally, one could think of how to actually publish books. While this is far in the future, imagining a series of Wiki-translated books on the shelf is tempting. But it won’t be easy, as every user can compose his own version, as pointed out. One could try to print centrally the most popular ones; probably it’s far better to provide only links to book-on-demand companies in the user’s country, which print books for an acceptable price. I fear that at the moment, you have to pay a large sum for the first copy; but this depends completely on the company and can change in the future. In the latter case, the PDF just needs a nice (selectable) cover sheet.