

What is a CAT Tool?

If you are a new translator, you may be wondering what CAT tools are and why they are required by many potential clients.

A Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tool is software that speeds up the translation process. CAT software works by saving previous translations to a translation memory so that translators can reuse translations that have already been written. When a translator comes across a previously translated segment, CAT tools prompt translators to reuse an existing translation saved to its translation memory. Translation memories are like databases to which a translator saves their work. CAT tools also allow translators to create term bases so that the software prompts translators to apply the corresponding term from its term base. Translators often create and use their own translation memories and term banks or use those provided by their clients.

Computer Assisted Translation software is different from machine translation software. While CAT software often includes machine translation features, CAT tools were designed to allow translators to reuse their own translations or the translations provided by their clients. In addition to helping translators work efficiently, CAT software allows translators to deliver consistency throughout translations. Above all, CAT software requires humans to do the work. Even if human translators apply suggestions by machine translators, the human translator still must approve or edit the machine translation as necessary. Moreover, CAT tools allow translators to export their translations into PDF or Microsoft Office documents so that their target texts are formatted just like the source documents.

One of the most popular CAT software programs is SDL Trados Studio. As a translator you may notice that the majority of the jobs you bid on will require you to use Trados. Due to its popularity, you might think of Trados as the Microsoft Office of the industry. As a result, it is also one of the most expensive CAT tools. If you are a member of the American Translator's Association (ATA), you can apply a significant discount to your purchase. Another popular CAT tool is Memsource. It's used entirely online, and clients who require it often cover the costs for you.

While many of the features of CAT software are user-friendly, some require a little training to master. In my next series, I will explain how to use some of these features.