Do your glossaries excel?

Interpreters love glossaries, for preparation at home and for work in the booth. But we need them to be more than a list of hard-to-navigate terms; we want them to work for us and not make us work for them. Using a spreadsheet can fill the bill.

All my early PC glossaries were made using word processor tables (in WordPerfect 5.1!). For a bilingual glossary I'd have a nice table that looked something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>Affirmative, generally speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Negative, I think</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The advantage of using this kind of table (instead of making columns by using manual tabs or, worse, spaces) is that you can easily move the Spanish column to the left, add a column for French, or sort by any of the columns for printing.

But there were some drawbacks. First, if I was entering words in English from the source document and looking up the translations later, when I got to the end of the table I would have to tab through each column to get the next row. Or, if the meeting happened to include all four of my languages, I would usually enter English and Spanish in my first bout with the documents and have to tab through French and Catalan for every row or use the arrow keys.

My Word glossary template had three pages' worth of rows to fill in, but eventually I would get to the end of that... and then have to add more rows or once again tab to the last column.

Sometimes I would want to group some elements in non-alphabetical order: cancer drugs for breast cancer, statistical terms for any medical meeting, types of presses for a printers' meeting, and so forth. If I put them in separate tables, they wouldn't sort into the regular alphabetical order. If I added a column, that was one more column to tab through. And long tables can slow Word to a crawl.

Enter Excel. The way it's set up right out of the box [i], I can use the Tab key to move a cell to the right, and the Enter key to go down to the first cell in the next row: I can now use as many columns as I want without having to tab through them all. This means I can have a column for Type (e.g. "antiretrovirals", or "tropical skin diseases") and another column for Paper (or Speaker), so I can group the terms in the order that I expect them to come up and refresh my memory just before each presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Yes  Sí  Affirmative, generally speaking  Adverb  1Basics
No   No  Negative, I think            Adverb  1Basics
However Por mucho que              Conjunction 2Links
However Sin embargo               Adverb  1Basics

It also has a helpful autocomplete feature: if you've already typed a term in the same column, it will be offered to you as a suggestion, so you can decide not to enter it twice. It isn't perfect (if you have more than one term starting with the letters you've typed, it won't offer any) but it helps, especially with those ancillary columns.

Even better: if you're entering a whole bunch of terms that belong to the same Type or the same Paper, you can wait till you finish the batch and enter the type or the name of the paper presenter just once [ii].

To help prevent mistakes, you can keep your column headers visible all the time while you're entering data [iii]: no more French terms in your Italian column!

Finally, I'm all for alphabetical sorting if I'm going to print a glossary, but I usually like to keep the entries together in the order I've made them as that better reminds me of how they relate to each other. Excel makes it very easy to add yet another column for index numbers [iv].

Looking up terms is probably Excel's weakest point (but it's certainly no worse than Word, never mind paper glossaries). You need to get used to the right shortcut (Ctrl+F in English, Ctrl+B in Spanish, etc.) [v]. This is where Interplex, the excellent program developed by Peter Sand, comes into its own, displaying terms from your current glossary and extending the search to other glossaries if need be. My alternative is X1, a desktop search program that provides a preview of the search results. It isn't perfect, but it works, it doesn't require me to do imports and exports in Interplex, and it can search through glossaries supplied by colleagues or clients in other formats. In fact, it can search for anything on my hard drive, so I can also use it to find specific wording in downloaded reference documents. Other programs (Google Desktop Search or Copernic Desktop Search) should have similar functionality.

Some people dislike Excel for glossaries because they think they can't display several lines at a time; not true! [vi] Others report trouble moving columns around in Excel; that, too, can be easily handled. [vii]

Possibly the greatest hurdle is the way Excel deals with cell text: it confuses people used to word processors. If you select a cell and start typing, you type over whatever's in there. The easiest way to edit the text that is already inside is to use F2 after selecting the cell: this will place your cursor at the end of the cell text. If you choose to use a mouse, double-click where you want to type.

A minor issue is the fact that you can't start your cell entry with a mathematical operator such as =. I use > to remind myself that a term pair is unidirectional (e.g., por mucho que > however); all I need to do is add a space before the > sign.

Printing is the last choking point I can think of. If you want your glossary on paper, it can be hard to figure out how to get it printed right. My template file does a pretty good job. [viii]

On the whole, by using Excel I've managed to figure out a system that works for me and meshes well with my study methods.

So, if you're writing out your glossaries in longhand on filing cards and are happy, no problem. If you're using Interplex, even better. Otherwise, do consider Excel (or your own friendly spreadsheet program).
How-to instructions in this article refer to Excel 97 but are largely applicable to all versions up to Excel 2003. Later versions may require different methods.

Select the cell where you've typed the term, then drag the cross that appears on the cell's bottom right corner all the way down to the last cell you want to label this way.

Select the leftmost header cell, and go Window -> Freeze panels.

Select the cells in that column down to the last row and then use Edit -> Fill down -> Series and just leave the default entries. Presto, you have a numbered list. Now you can sort in alphabetical order and then go back to the original order.

Select a cell in the column for the source language, use the shortcut and, the first time in any session, click Options and select By Column instead of By Row.

You just need to go Format -> Cell -> Align -> Adjust and the row containing that cell will grow to the size required to display all the text it includes. The best thing to do is select all the cells in your sheet (by clicking on the upper left corner between the column letters and the row numbers) and set it up that way for the whole sheet.

Select the column by clicking on the letter at the top, cutting it, and clicking on the column that will end up just right of it, then right-click and select "Insert cut cells".

Here's how it's done.

Printing column headers across the top: File -> Page setup -> Sheet and then select the first row where it says "Repeat rows at the top".

Not printing a certain column? Easy as pie. You select the columns you do want, and go File -> Print area -> Set. Since I never print my extra grouping columns (such as Type or Paper), I usually set those columns to a smaller type size - 8, or even 6 - so the row won't end up wider because of a line break.

Telling one entry from the next: horizontal lines are easiest. Plain black lines look awful, but if you play around, you can set the horizontal separator to an unobtrusive light gray dotted line that's barely visible.

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Recommended citation format: