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Certified English-to-German technical translator, consultant, and author

About the author

Jost Zetzsche is a certified English-to-German technical translator, a translation technology consultant, and a widely published author on various aspects of translation. Originally from Hamburg, Germany, he earned a Ph.D. in the field of Chinese translation history and linguistics. His computer guide for translators, [A Translator's Tool Box for the 21st Century](#), is now in its eleventh edition and his technical newsletter for translators goes out to more than 10,000 translation professionals. In 2012, Perigee/Penguin published his co-authored [Found in Translation](#), a book about translation and interpretation for the general public.

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How Translation Changes You and Me

In today's world, it's become a truism: Translation is an essential key for unlocking commerce, communication, mutual understanding, and many other doorways of great and profound importance. I don't want to belittle this obvious fact. Instead, I'd like to take you on a little journey to a different doorway, one which reveals translation as a master key of even greater complexity and significance than we had thought, one which shows that translation truly defines us.

SOUND A BIT LIKE HYPERBOLE? WELL, HEAR ME OUT.

Language is an essential part of who we are as human beings—in fact, many say it is the very characteristic that makes us human beings. Given the importance of language, it stands to reason that we need to look at how languages develop. Language is not static; instead, it's continually and often rapidly evolving. And, not surprisingly, we often feel threatened by that development. Again, everything related to language cuts close to who we are.

For instance, most of us have encountered or participated in discussions on how texting is “ruining” the English (or German or French or other) language. If you've been among those expressing concern for the future of your language, you might want to have a look at [John McWhorter's TED talk](#).

How do the majority of new words enter a language? One path is through technology that extends or confines our ability to express ourselves, as in the example of texting. Another way is through youth language (you might want to check out the [Urban Dictionary](#) if you don't know what I'm talking about). Yet another pathway is the expression of new technologies (“[tweet](#)” me if that needs to be explained). But a very large source—maybe even the largest—comes from translation. You will see this less often in dominant languages such as English, but if you were to ask your Italian, Russian, or Dutch friend to tell you the name of some modern technology, you might think she was still speaking English since many of those terms are “translated” by using the English loan word.

Translators are gatekeepers who decide how to transfer terms and concepts from one language to another and from one culture to another. While you and I as the language's speakers have the last word (pun intended) on which new words make it into our vocabulary and which do not, we almost always start off with a suggestion that originated with an anonymous translator. And more often than not, that translator's suggestion will stick—if he's done his job right.

In fact, it's hard to imagine an experienced professional translator who has not coined one or many new terms in her field of specialization within her target language (the language into which she translates). And this isn't surprising. The encounter of languages and cultures provides the most fertile ground for newly introduced ideas and concepts, and one result is new language, the very language that we use day in and day out. »





Sometimes stories of such encounters make us view our world in a whole new light, even if they come from very unexpected sources.

Inuktitut is the language of the Inuit people in northern Canada, most of whom live in the territory of Nunavut. Like most languages, Inuktitut speakers at some point needed to find a word to express the English term “Internet.” When faced with this predicament, translators from the vast majority of languages have chosen the easy and slightly unimaginative route of adopting some version of the English term.

You can see a sample of this method here:

Bosnian:	Internet	Malay:	Internet
Bulgarian:	интернет	Maltese:	Internet
Catalan:	Internet	Yucatec Maya:	Internet
Croatian:	Internet	Norwegian:	Internett
Czech:	Internetu	Querétaro Otomí:	Internet
Danish:	Internet	Polish:	Internet
Dutch:	Internet	Portuguese:	Internet
Estonian:	Internet	Romanian:	Internet
Finnish:	Internet	Russian:	Интернет
French:	Internet	Serbian:	internet
German:	Internet	Slovak:	Internet
Greek:	Διαδίκτυο	Slovenian:	Internet
Haitian Creole:	entènèt	Spanish:	Internet
Hmong Daw:	internet	Swedish:	Internet
Hungarian:	Internet	Turkish:	Internet
Indonesian:	Internet	Ukrainian:	Інтернет
Italian:	Internet	Vietnamese:	Internet
Klingon:	internet	Zulu:	internet
Latvian:	interneta		
Lithuanian:	interneto		

No question—it’s straightforward, but rather dull. And not good enough for Eva Aariak, Nunavut’s former languages commissioner, who after much consideration chose the word ᐃᑭᑦᐱᑖᑦ (ikiiaqqivik) as the Inuktitut translation for Internet. This choice dug deep into Inuit culture to unearth a novel connection with the modern technological world. ᐃᑭᑦᐱᑖᑦ is a traditional term that means “traveling through layers,” and it refers to what a shaman does when he travels across time and space to mine information about living or deceased relatives. Kind of like what the Internet does.

It’s a powerful and very intuitive image for Inuktitut speakers. But of equal significance is the power of this translation for us. Next time you hear the word “Internet,” your mind’s eye may very well picture Inuit shamans traveling through layers to find meaning. That’s the power of translation: It has the potential to change our view of the world, even through languages that we don’t know and may never master or even otherwise encounter.

It also means that we need to do everything in our power to preserve the world’s 6,000 existing languages, many of which are threatened. Because it’s not only about “them”; it’s about what you and I lose when we can’t learn through these kinds of stories and insights.

And Eva Aariak? She became the premier of Nunavut. Seems like an appropriate position for someone with such power over language and the human mind. ●