

Technical Tools for Translators

“So, what’s Unicode again?” asked the project manager. “And how am I supposed to handle it?”

I stifled a groan of frustration on the phone and launched into yet another explanation. I hoped I still sounded patient, but inside I was growing increasingly perplexed.

In my job as a technical translator and localization consultant, I’d been growing more and more surprised at the lack of technical expertise and software tool knowledge among many translators and project managers. I watched as countless hours were wasted on tasks that could have been done automatically or in a fraction of the time. And as an editor, I often struggled to improve texts that were translated with an adequate level of linguistic or subject-matter expertise, but whose quality was sub-par because the translator didn’t know how to use the necessary tools or formats.

I finally developed my own theory about what had happened: some time after translators began routinely using computers for their work, many of us convinced ourselves that we weren’t smart (or technical) enough to become proficient computer users. The irony is that many of us translate highly technical and complex subject matter every day. There’s no lack of intelligence among us—just a prevailing not-smart-enough-for-computers fallacy that we’ve bought into.

I became convinced that it was time to adopt a new paradigm for our profession: not only is it acceptable to use computers well—it’s critical to our success. And to achieve that success, we have to educate the non-technical fuzziness out of our lives.

My first contribution toward this goal was to write an e-book, *The Translator’s Tool Box: A Computer Primer for Translators*. Written in plain and simple English, it’s essentially a compendium of suggestions based on what has worked well (or not so well) for me. I like to think of it as a tool box from which translators can choose the tools that may be appropriate for them at any certain time.

As the book caught on and translators and project managers began asking for more frequent updates, I started to publish a free bi-weekly e-mail newsletter called *The Tool Kit*. If I ever had any doubts, the snowballing success of this newsletter has proven that my theory was indeed firmly rooted in fact—there is a great need for targeted technical education among translators, and *The Tool Box* and *Tool Kit* are beginning to bridge that gap between our technical paralysis and our potential.

Both publications provide translators with an overview of the technical issues that most of us are regularly confronted with. They include basic activities such as zipping and unzipping files and file management with Windows, as well as more complex tasks such as working with desktop publishing applications and conversion issues.

I’m as convinced of the need for this technical education now as I was when I first began writing, and spreading the word continues to be my passion. If you’re interested in sampling these tips and tricks for yourself, you can read more about both the Tool Box

book at www.internationalwriters.com/toolbox and the free Tool Kit newsletter at www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit.

Finally, here's my pep talk that I conclude my workshops with: Read these resources and then forge ahead with courage and creativity! Computers and the plethora of specialized software programs are powerful tools for translation, tools that are more accessible and affordable than ever before. With these tool boxes at your disposal, the only limits to your craftsmanship as a translator are the boundaries you set for yourself.