

# Are We Stupid?

By Jost Zetzsche

**D**oes this sound familiar? *For this translation memory program, you can stay right in the environment that you already know, and you only have to learn a few new shortcuts.*

Or:

*All you have to do is to right-click on a file and select Translate.*

To me, these marketing slogans “translate” as follows: “We think that you are really not smart enough to understand much about computers, and are certainly not clever enough to learn programs or, for that matter, to open them appropriately. This is why we address you with this lowest common denominator.”

Maybe it’s not completely fair to interpret these slogans so harshly, but the fact is that similar ones are often used as the primary marketing message for tools—including translation memory applications—that many translators are supposed to spend most of their active work time using. Now, no one will disagree that it is a positive thing for any product, including software programs, to be easy to use and intuitive to learn. But is this why we buy it? If you take a look at the websites that market the “corporate” versions of the same programs, you will be hard-pressed to find any mention of “easy” or “intuitive.” Are those potential users more “professional” than we are? If Microsoft praises the ease of use of its home editions of Office or Windows, it communicates appropriately to its broad masses of non-expert users. But should we be placed at the same basic level when we buy a highly specialized translation application?

The typical modern translator spends a disproportionate amount of

his or her working time behind the computer screen. Given this reality, it is remarkable (to say the least) that technology providers successfully market their products not primarily on the basis of processing power, productivity increase, or quality gain (all of which are indeed marks of many of those tools), but instead on ease of use. My question is not whether the tool providers are successful in marketing their products in this way—I know they are. Instead, I am curious about the

---

“...It is important for us to gain confidence and knowledge about the computer...”

---

effect of these messages. Is it this low expectation of software manufacturers that causes translators to feel inadequate to the task, or do we feel inadequate to start with and are these slogans just hammering it in? The answer probably lies somewhere in between those assumptions. What is important for us, however, is to gain confidence and knowledge about the computer, rather than just surviving with it.

My reason for writing this is obviously not to insult translators. Instead, I truly believe that there is a need for more computer education and a greater awareness that the computer can be your friend, or—as I write in my new book—your “tool box.” Over the years, I have worked on numerous translation teams, and even offered support for one of the major computer-assisted translation tools. I know the computer knowledge of the average freelance translator is probably somewhere in the area of 3 on a scale of 1-10. To work most effec-

tively, it should be an 8 or 9.

What strikes me most about all of this is how we manage somehow to classify our lack of technical understanding in our own work environment into a different category from the technical understanding that we need for our translation work. After all, many of us translate highly technical documents, including computer software and documentation that describe infinitely more technical issues than we will ever have to deal with in our work with computers.

True, if we had to weigh the value of having translation skills versus computer skills, translation skills would win hands down. We wouldn’t be able to make a living as translators without being able to translate, while we can survive without being particularly skilled on the computer, a mere—albeit major—tool. But if the computer is indeed a major tool, wouldn’t that alone be reason enough to really try to master it? A print shop worker who is not skilled with computers nowadays may still be able to print beautifully, but he would most likely not find a job because the demands of the printing world (and the print shop owner) have changed. Many of us translators are freelancers who do not face the same external pressure as the print shop worker. However, we also own our own businesses, so we should have the same considerations as the print shop owner and require a honing of our skills.

It’s clear that my answer to the question in the title of this article (perhaps it should be called a polemic pamphlet!) is: No, we are not stupid. At some point, someone must have communicated to us that computers are only a necessary evil that we should neither trust nor really become acquainted with. Or maybe we convinced ourselves that this was the case with

---

an almost in-born fear that computers, especially computer-assisted translation software, are a real threat to our livelihood. At this point in time, however, nothing could be further from the truth. If we have the patience to upgrade our computer skills and to invest in the necessary software, our computers can give us tremendous opportunities to produce better and more consistent translations and, at the same time, to make more money.

Here are some ways you can begin to reclaim your computer and your confidence:

- Fine-tune and personalize your operating system to your own specifications so it looks and

responds the way you want it to, just as you design your own office space for maximum efficiency.

- Build up your library of utilities—you can often download programs for free or at a minimum price from the Internet—that are developed specifically to save you time and effort.
- Make an informed decision on which office suite software and version is right for you.
- Don't be afraid of computer-assisted translation software. There are differences among them that need to be researched and taken into account, but learning to use one of these programs well can make a spectacular difference in

your translation work and earnings.

For details on these steps and many more, I've written a new book called *A Translator's Tool Box for the 21st Century*. You can find more information on the book at [www.internationalwriters.com/toolbox](http://www.internationalwriters.com/toolbox).

There have never been more resources to help translators succeed than we have today, and the computer plays a central role in nearly all. As skilled craftsmen, we know that it's not enough to have the right tools—we also need to know how to use them. And with our skills and experience, we are well qualified to learn to use them well.

*ata*