GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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Schereschewsky and the Cloud

Oh, it was such a pleasure recently to reconnect with my good old friend Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky. Now, he was not a friend because he was a particularly pleasant man; in fact, he wasn't. Nor were we friends because he was particularly good with people; he also really wasn't. In fact, he was so notoriously bad with people that in his 40-plus years as a missionary in 19th-century China, he "converted" only "one family and a lad," at the same time suffering a continual turnover of co-workers who typically could not stand to be with the man for more than a few weeks. (Ironically, his general inability to connect with people did not prevent him from setting out to walk (!) the 1,500 miles from Beijing to Shanghai when he heard that an unmarried female missionary was to arrive on a boat from the U.S. Apparently, no other transportation was available to him because of the severe winter weather. Though they had never met before, he welcomed her boat in Shanghai, and in no time they were married.)

Clearly, given our life spans in different centuries, we never met personally. So how did we become friends? Here are some snippets from his life that might help to explain my fondness for him.

Schereschewsky was born in a Jewish community in Lithuania in 1831 and, as a gifted student, enrolled in a rabbinical school early on to become a rabbi. As a young man, however, he converted to Christianity, which he pursued in formal studies in Germany and later in the U.S. He left the U.S. for China in 1859, and shortly afterward started what he would continue in some way or another to the day he died in 1906: the translation of the Bible into various forms of Chinese. In 1877, in an apparent effort by his denomination to remove him from direct ministry, he was promoted to the Episcopal bishopric. However, this new post proved too stressful for him, and four years later he suffered a breakdown (some say it was a stroke, while others claim it was Parkinson's) that left him paralyzed for the rest of his life. And thus began the most remarkable chapter of his remarkable life. He spent the remainder of his life pecking with his one remaining moveable finger on a manual typewriter to finish two complete translations of the Bible, one into Mandarin and one into a lower form of classical Chinese. (If you are wondering, he typed on an English typewriter and had his Romanized version rendered into characters by a Chinese co-worker.)

I first "met" Schereschewsky when I wrote a thesis on Chinese Bible translation 15 years ago, and I reconnected with him on a recent trip to Israel to speak to the Israeli Translators Association. I had a feeling before my trip that St. Jerome would not be a good "translation hero" in Israel (I learned only later how bad he really would have been!), so I revived my friendship with Schereschewsky to introduce him to my Israeli colleagues.

"Translation hero?" I have used this column previously to warn repeatedly against getting stuck in the past and failing to recognize that today's translation requirements are very, very different from those of St. Jerome and, yes, of Schereschewsky as well. But as I was working for a client this week whose translators work on an online-based system with a strong machine translation component and rather rudimentary terminology management and translation memory components, my mind kept returning to Schereschewsky and his plight and passion. And I wished myself back with both feet on the ground—or, in his case, in a wheelchair—rather than with my head in the digital cloud.

If I were not a proponent of translation technology, I would not be writing this column. But I also think that we need to be cautious about how fast we rush into adopting new technologies.

Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (1831-1906) completed two translations of the Bible using only one finger on a manual typewriter.

Yes, it sounds great to work in systems that are completely online-based. But is our infrastructure quite ready for it yet? (Note that I am writing this from the Oregon coast, where I have a very limited choice of Internet service providers, with one or the other being down fairly regularly.) And while it is true that all too often we are not masters of our own personal computers, the frustration of having an online server go down that contains the translation asset and all other materials would be so much greater. In this case, we really would not be able to do anything about it, and there really would not be a backup. (At least when we are working on our own system and do not have a backup, we can blame it on our own stupidity!).

And then there is the aspect of machine translation. The majority of translation environment tools (TEnTs) now offer direct integration with Google Translate and/or other generic machine translation engines, including tools like OmegaT, an open-source tool built for and by its users. How helpful are these machine translation tools for our work? Could they possibly be more distracting than helpful? They admittedly are always optional, but I wonder whether the energy invested in providing these capabilities would not be better invested in improving proven technologies, such as translation memory and terminology management.

Aren't you glad you do not have to work like Schereschewsky? I am, but I also admire his passion, his persistence, and his reminder that tools are good only if they actually allow us to keep our feet on the ground without our heads stuck in the (digital) clouds just because they are there.

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