

# Insights from the Tech Desk: Sitting Down with Jost Zetsche

By Marcela Jenney

## I had the privilege of

interviewing Jost Zetsche, an ATA-certified English→German translator, author, and consultant on technical solutions for the translation and localization industry. A native of Hamburg, Germany, Jost earned a Ph.D. in Chinese history and linguistics from the University of Hamburg in 1996. He joined the translation industry in 1997, supervising company operations for a staff of 60 at a localization and technical documentation provider. He has since led or participated in localization projects in all major software, online, and documentation environments. In 1999, Jost co-founded International Writers' Group and, in 2008, TranslatorsTraining.com, a website for comparing translation tools.

Jost is the author of a resource book for translators called *A Translator's Tool Box—A Computer Primer for Translators*, which is already in its ninth edition. He also offers a newsletter for translators, *The Tool Kit*, with tips and information

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## There is technology, but we still need a human face for translation.

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about the latest advances in technology in the industry, and writes the monthly GeekSpeak column in *The ATA Chronicle*.

**Marcela:** Let's just start by discussing your sidekick, Jeromobot, "the patron saint of translators" that readers of your newsletter and column have come to know. How did you come to create him?

**Jost:** My little godson gave me a robot five or six years ago. It was very sweet, but I didn't really know what to do with it. I've talked about the use of Saint Jerome, the patron saint of translators, throughout the years, but I felt we needed to update him a bit. So, I

combined Saint Jerome and the little robot and came up with Jeromobot, and he has become a rock star in the process.

**Marcela:** What is his message?

**Jost:** Well, the message that has evolved over the years is that we translators need to embrace the linguistic genius of Saint Jerome and the passion he had for language while also embracing modern technology. Those who tend not to embrace technology need to do so. And those who only embrace technology need to remember that translation certainly has a human face and that translation technology is indebted to the actual translator.

**Marcela:** You are well known in the industry. What has been the secret of your success?

**Jost:** I think part of it is curiosity. My background is very untechnical. In fact, I'm a Chinese studies major and have written about the translation of the Bible into Chinese, none of which has anything to do with my writings on technology today. But I'm very interested in trying to find out whether there are ways to improve upon the work translators do. So, if there is a key to my success, I think it would be that I'm curious about how to improve the work environment and the processes by which we translate.

**Marcela:** In what ways has your newsletter helped you grow a brand name?

**Jost:** Certainly it has portrayed me as somebody who knows how to use technology. About 40% of my business is consulting and 60% translation. Many companies who subscribe to my newsletter contact me as a consultant and ask me to help them fix the problems they might have with implementing technology. As far as my translation business goes, because of the consistency of the newsletter there is the message that I'm reliable and consistently produce results.

**Marcela:** Consistency. I think that is the key right there. Now, let's talk about social media. How do you use social media and how have you benefited from them?

**Jost:** I have been very selective with social media. I'm not doing Facebook or LinkedIn, and I'm quite happy with that. With my newsletter and the column in *The ATA Chronicle*, plus using Twitter quite a bit, I get enough of

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my message and my creative output out.

I'm very thankful for Twitter, as it has been a real key to my business strategy. Not only do I announce everything I'm doing on Twitter, it has also been a very important place for me to gather information. Twitter is the place where I can find in a fairly short amount of time—half an hour a day or so—all the information I need about our industry. So, while for many social media outlets have been a place to make new contacts, my focus has been on social media as an information-gathering source.

**Marcela:** What is your outlook for the translation or localization industry for the next five years?

**Jost:** Well, you know we always say these are exciting times, and that's so much overused, but I think these truly ARE exciting times right now. Technology, particularly machine translation, has once again taken a big lead. I think that we are on the verge of becoming a two-class society and that language services providers (LSPs) need to decide where they stand and what they want to do. While machine translation is open to smaller LSPs, it is certainly more accessible to very large providers, partly because some of the larger LSPs own machine translation technology and are able to utilize it more easily and efficiently. Also, the kinds of clients that these large LSPs have, such as Microsoft,

Adobe, and Oracle, are interested in and have done their own work on machine translation. Therefore, it is easier for those LSPs to use that kind of technology.

Would it be bad to have a two-class society, with smaller LSPs serving small or medium clients only? I'm not sure, but if an LSP is particularly eager to work for a large technology or automotive provider, it needs to adopt and embrace this new technology quickly.

I think that we sometimes look at those very large companies, such as Microsoft, and think they are the industry. But, of course, they are not. They are only a small segment of the industry. There is still plenty of other work to be done. In just the past year and a half, a lot of doomsayers have been saying that machine translation, crowdsourcing, and all these big words are a threat to our industry. Those are things that will have an effect on our industry but will not destroy it by any means. I think we are at a crossroads right now, so these are exciting and good times.

**Marcela:** What do you feel should be in every professional translator's arsenal in order to succeed in this competitive market?

**Jost:** I think that depends very much on what kind of market you have. The translation industry is not monolithic by any means. It consists of many ➡

different segments and, depending on what segments you serve, you need to choose your tools. If your clients mostly work in social media, then you'd better be familiar with crowdsourcing technologies and processes. If you're particularly interested in translation for, let's say, the medical industry, your emphasis should probably be on terminology research and terminology tools. If you're interested in other industries, then other tools need to be emphasized.

Still, I think that any translator working in a nonliterary field needs to use and own some kind of a computer-assisted translation tool. As far as specific tools for specific industries or segments of an industry, that depends on what interests you.

**Marcela:** What recommendation would you give to translators and LSPs about differentiating themselves from their competitors?

**Jost:** I think the most obvious recommendation is that, unless you are of a size that allows you to work in many vertical industries, you specialize in probably two vertical industries. It's very important, I think, for both the translator and the LSP to know that they will not be successful in offering themselves as something good for everything and anything. You need to have your specialization, and that's the area in which you will succeed.

Of course, if you have chosen a field of expertise that has been particularly hit by today's economic crisis, that specialization may not have been advantageous to you lately. Thus, while I think it is still true that we need to have a specialization, maybe what we have learned from the latest economic crisis is that we need to have two vertical fields in which we can work and be an expert—two areas

that can offset each other in case a crisis repeats itself.

The other thing I would recommend, just from my own experience, would again be curiosity. I think that curiosity about your clients is very important. Who are your clients? Show them that you are interested in them and that you have passion for what they do. Do not treat them as "just clients" but as real partners. Those are ways to differentiate yourself from other contenders.

terminology consultants, and information hubs for crowdsourcing groups. We can also look at successful crowdsourcing projects and learn from things that those guys have done right or wrong and work from there.

As for machine translation, I think there is a real gap between machine translation developers and translators. I feel there is a need for both parties to put the past behind them when they were not always very friendly to each other, and to accept that there is now a

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## We can become project leaders, terminology consultants, and information hubs for crowdsourcing groups.

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**Marcela:** How can translators benefit from crowdsourcing and machine translation?

**Jost:** I think the question you ask is interesting because you assume there will be benefits from machine translation and crowdsourcing. I think you are right; there can be. But I think that many translators have never asked themselves that question. Many translators see both crowdsourcing and machine translation as threats and have not focused on the benefits they can have from those new technologies. I think the reason we have not stepped into both those areas so far is due to lack of leadership.

Even companies like Facebook are still struggling with streamlining their crowdsourcing efforts, and I think those are areas where translators can help. We can become project leaders,

need to talk to each other. We translators need to accept the fact that machine translation has made progress in the past few years and that it is presently finding many applications. We also need to sell our expertise to the developers as consultants or as linguistic experts to improve the output of machine translation.

There is also the area of post-editing machine translation, which I think will grow and become a job description all its own, probably fairly separate from translation or editing. In addition, I think there are also very high-profile jobs available for us in machine translation, but I think it's partly up to us not to wait for the machine translation engineers to come out and ask us to work with them. We should approach the engineers and say, "Look, I have expertise

you don't have, and I want to work with you to make your results better. What can we do to work together?"

**Marcela:** Last but not least, what advice would you give to those just starting in the translation profession?

**Jost:** There is quite a bit of talk about how we translators are proud of our profession. I think we should be proud to be language experts and translation professionals, but I think we need to define what that pride is actually about. Why am I proud of my profession? Why do I say I am a translator and love to be a translator? What has gotten lost is that we have not reflected enough on why it is great to be a translator. Am I proud to translate stuff that a machine can do? Not really, because that is what a machine can do.

So, I think that newcomers, as well as people who have been in the industry for quite a while, need to learn to separate from the chaff. We need to say, "I'm proud to be a translator because I have expertise in areas that no one else, including no machine, has. I want to help the industry to separate the stuff that only I can do, and that's why I'm proud to be a translator." I'm not sure whether that is really advice for a newcomer, but it is what defines my idea of our industry. And it certainly would not hurt for a newcomer to have that attitude!

**Marcela:** It is like saying "express the passion behind the profession."

**Jost:** Yes, but put the passion in the right place. Do not say, "I'm proud to be a translator, so I don't want anything taken away from me." In reality, much of what could be taken away from you and done by machines—whether through translation memory, machine translation, or other technologies—is not a part of that. You should be proud of those areas that only you can do, because what is pride if not an attitude that you are unique in what you can offer, and, obviously, the uniqueness only applies if no one else can do it.

**Marcela:** Very nice insight. Thank you very much for sharing all this with us.

**Jost:** You're very welcome, Marcela.

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#### Letter to the Editor Continued from p. 9

2. Translators must know the source language and culture well enough to work from it. If the writer of the target text is not familiar with the source language and culture, but works in collaboration with someone who is, both must be given credit.
3. Translators must be skilled writers in the target language, with abilities comparable to those of educated native speakers and writers.
4. Translators must be knowledgeable about what they are translating. Technical writers must be experts in the subject matter. Literary translators must be familiar with whatever genre they are translating.

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