GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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Cool!

Wikipedia may be experiencing a bit of a coolness crisis. A case in point: you give a presentation at a conference and the central point to support your conclusion is a Wikipedia quote. Not cool. You are hotly debating a certain topic at a party and insist on a certain argument because you "read it in a Wikipedia article." Again, not cool.

But there are plenty of ways that Wikipedia is still cool, and that is particularly true for translators. And unlike so many other things that I mention in this column, the value of Wikipedia is not just for translators of "large" languages. In fact, I would be surprised if any of you reading this column are not represented by the almost 300 languages in which Wikipedia is currently available.

How is this helpful for translators?

First stop is the homepage. If you open www.wikipedia.org and scroll down to the bottom of that page, you can view all of the languages that have more than 100 articles on Wikipedia. (To see all 284 languages, click on the "Other Languages" link at the very bottom of that page.) What is that good for? Well, first of all, it should make your heart swell with pride to be an active part of such a multilingual world. And, more practically, it is a great way to check whether you can display all the different languages. For every language that is displayed with squares (□□□), you know that you are missing a font that has those characters in its repertoire. This is a must for project managers. And that is cool.

Second stop: terminology research. The many different language versions of Wikipedia are not translations of each other, and that is an important aspect to the multicultural (self-) perception of Wikipedia. Articles are typically adjusted (and chosen) by volunteers to fit the target locale. Still, Wikipedia is a powerful tool for terminology research, especially when it comes to top-level terms. You all know that different language entries for that term are displayed on the left-hand side (or the right if you start out with a right-to-left language such as Arabic or Hebrew), making the correct translation possibly just a click away.

There are also tools that support a more in-depth comparison of different language versions so that you can quickly not only spot the top-level term but some of the terminology that surrounds it. Manypedia (www.manypedia.com) is a tool that searches Wikipedia for a specific term and then looks up the corresponding Wikipedia pages in other languages. It will then tell you the percentage of the similarity of the concepts and display the pages you request side-by-side.

Let's try it step by step. In the pop-up bar on the top of Manypedia's page you can enter a search term under "Search" and then select which language version you want to see. The correct page will be displayed on the left side of the screen. Under "Compare with the," select the language version with which you want to compare it. In the page that appears on the right side of the page, you can select "Disable Translation" to see the page in the original corresponding language. Again, very cool.

Meme Miner (www.fredrocha.net/MemeMiner) is somewhat similar, but you leave more things up to the judgment of the computer. Just as with Manypedia, you can query Wikipedia for certain terms. Meme Miner's underlying program then mines corresponding information from Wikipedia in another language that you have specified. It is also a great tool, especially if you just want a quick idea for a term or phrase. Not hard to label—cool.

And third, there are tools that make the translation of Wikipedia pages easier. As professional translators, we all get asked to donate our time for all kinds of things, so this might be helpful to know about. Again, different language versions of Wikipedia are not translations of each other, so ideally there are very few completely translated pages. But we might notice a subsection or paragraph missing, say, in the page about Warsaw in the Dutch Wikipedia, the same section that was done well in the Polish version. To aid you in the process of translating just that small snippet, Microsoft Research India has released WikiBhasha (www.wikibhasha.org). You can use a machine-translated "gisted" version of that section as a starting point or start from scratch. Once you are done you can submit right from within the tool to Wikipedia. Once again, cool. Very cool, indeed. *ata*