



## GeekSpeak

### Mis-aligned

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The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost is the co-author of *Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World*, to be released in October and already available for preorder on Amazon.

**Over the years,** I have regularly profiled the technology offered by NoBabel, a sophisticated line of products designed to align already-translated text into translation memories and then “massage” these (and other) translation memories to increase match rates for newly translated content. Not only was it the only program out there that performed this kind of service, but it worked great if used properly.

Unfortunately, my use of the past tense to describe the product is intentional. A few weeks ago, I talked with Ilia Kaufman, the former chief executive officer of NoBabel (and its underlying company, KCSL), who has permanently closed down his business and withdrawn the technology. Why? He was not able to make an adequate profit.

Honestly, that makes me so sad.

I have written a lot about the disconnect we have when it comes to business processes. (“We” here includes freelance translators and many of the smaller language services providers [LSPs].) Many of us labor under the delusion that we “can do things ourselves” somehow, without the need for technology and professional services, forgetting in the process really to sit down and evaluate that notion’s efficiency and business sense. Or, as Ilia

put it, “Translators work very hard to save very little.”

Ours is a difficult industry in which to work because of its low profit margins, and that is especially true for LSPs. Is this not the very reason to look at using methods that make us more efficient? Even if it sometimes means an upfront investment?

Another thing that Ilia mentioned during our talk: the best technology will not work well if expectations are not realistic or if the technology is not handled well. I agreed completely and felt guilty at the same time. Maybe I should spend more time *explaining* technology rather than just throwing it out there saying, “It’s great. Use it.”

But the deeper point behind Ilia’s assessment is how it describes our relationship with technology. We begin with uneasiness. Then, once we have overcome our initial unease, we assume the technology will solve all our problems—which is obviously unrealistic, especially when it comes to language technology—and are terribly disappointed when it does not. Finally, because we know we are smart, we assume we do not really have to learn how to use the technology—it will somehow just “come to us” as we use it. Well, it often does not, and our results would be so much better if we took

time to sit down and understand what the technology in question is supposed to do and how we can get it there.

Ilia’s response to this consumer disconnect was to begin coupling his products with services to make sure that the end product was as good as it could be. He had actually started to see some success, but it came just a little too late.

Where does this leave us? As far as finding an alternative for the NoBabel software suite, there are tools to help you with alignment if you are unhappy with the alignment features that most translation environment tools offer. One option is Terminotix and its various versions of AlignFactory, whose alignment is far superior to run-of-the-mill alignment features in standard tools. But the bitter truth is that no other product offers all of NoBabel’s features, especially those related to enhancing the quality of translation memories.

Ideally, the lasting legacy of this story of NoBabel’s rise and fall would be that we have all grown a little wiser and will now be more open to using new technology—that we would realign our purchasing practices and our work processes! But I am not counting on it. Unfortunately, the elegant NoBabel one-stop solution is a relic of our own technological misalignment as an industry.

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the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. It was amazing to be walking the path to the enclave of the ruling Incas and their community. We were so high up that the Urubamba River was a ribbon in a basket of green velvet below us. Our knowledgeable indigenous guide informed us about the ruins, bridges, and medicinal vegetation surrounding us, as well as rare blooms that only

grew there. We barely made it in time to catch the bus waiting below the Gate of the Sun at Machu Picchu to take us to Aguas Calientes, where we spent the night. The next day was spent touring Machu Picchu itself. Set on a granite mountain, its architectural and archeological importance is unparalleled. We only had a brief time to explore the surroundings before we had to head back

to Lima to fly home.

Dream assignments? But they happen, and as the Spanish poet and dramatist Calderón de la Barca aptly put it, “Life is a dream and dreams are dreams.” The lesson—Focus on your aspirations, whatever they may be, and they will start to come into your life-dream on a regular basis.

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