



GeekSpeak

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The Spice of Life

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.

My first job in our industry was at a now-long-defunct language services provider in Bellingham, Washington. Once, when the local paper came to report on our rapidly growing company, I made sure to smuggle a bottle of aspirin into each of our group pictures—it had become symbolic for me of the never-ending headaches of our very, very long workdays and our desperate attempts to make sense of an industry that was new to us all.

Today I would bring a different talisman into such a group photo—my beloved coffee. Maybe in the form of a chipped mug from one of my clients, or my cherished and tarnished moka pot, or the French press that has been with me for so many years. There are many reasons why coffee would be appropriate. It spices up my life while I labor for hours on insipid technical documents. It keeps my head from hitting the keyboard before the translation is delivered. And it enriches my life with its wonderfully deep and mysterious taste. Perhaps you can relate.

The other day I listened to a radio interview (n.pr/KUUQLq) commemorating the death of the inventor of Mr. Coffee, the ubiquitous coffee machine of the 1970s American kitchen. But only members of the older generation will recall what Mr. Coffee replaced, a devilish contraption called the percolator that made truly vile, bitter, and soulless coffee. This machine cooked coffee by circulating boiling water through a layer of coffee grinds for as long as it took to kill the beverage's very last bit of good taste. The interviewee was asked why Americans would voluntarily choose to use something that produced something that contained caffeine but otherwise had the taste of medicine. He said: "I think it's because Americans love an appliance. You want to be able to plug it in and push a button."

Do you see where I am going with my coffee analogy in a column on translation and technology? What a perfect illustration of machine translation! It does not ~~taste good~~ read well, but (most of the time) it delivers what is required—the gist, or the liquid caffeine—albeit without much spice or taste.

So what is the translator's tasteful alternative? Two words: Kopi Luwak. Kopi Luwak is one of the fanciest and most flavorful coffees available. Made from the beans of coffee berries that are eaten by Indonesian civets—something between an otter and a cat—and passed through their digestive tracts, where enzymes transform the taste of these beans into a much more aromatic coffee. The civets then, ahem, defecate the beans, and lucky humans collect, clean, dry, and roast them. Only 1,000 pounds are sold every year, but the price ranges between \$160 and \$600 a pound. (If this is a little too scatological for your tastes, you might be more interested in the even more expensive Monkey Parchment Coffee, which comes from coffee beans that have been chewed up and spat out by Rhesus monkeys in India.)

Whether it passes through the digestive tract or not, it really is a clever metaphor for what we do, especially in comparison to the percolator, a.k.a. machine translation. Translating is not just a matter of replacing text, but of truly ingesting the whole source text. If there is a way to use the percolator to arrive at that point, fine. But here is my experience. My sweet, late grandma-in-law did not drink coffee herself, but knowing my passion for coffee, she tried valiantly to please me with some percolated Folgers. It was a lovely effort, but it took a lot of milk and sugar to make that bitter beverage into something enjoyable.

That is a good comparison for what happens when we use machine translation as a first draft for our translations. It can end up taking way more work than we intended to make it "right," and the result will probably still not be what we were hoping for in the first place.

Our ideal end product is not just an estimation of the target text, but one that is full of body and spice and life. It might take a lot of effort to get there, but the result is one for which customers are willing to pay.

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