

GeekSpeak

Jost Zetzsche



“The Measure of Intelligence Is the Ability to Change”

Whether or not this quote is really by Einstein, it certainly ought to be because it rings so true. Plus, it explains in a nutshell what I’d like to share with you here.

Within the past few weeks, I prepared several talks and articles that tried to sketch out what has happened in translation technology in the past few years and what likely will happen in the coming years. To summarize, I’m in awe of how much has changed and how much change is ongoing.

I remember a time when we felt the need to argue about whether it was even wise to use translation technology. When we finally more or less arrived at an agreement that, for most translators, the employment of some kind of translation technology was indeed helpful, we argued about whether we should use Macs or Windows PCs, Trados or Déjà Vu. (Yes, there once was actually a time when those seemed to be the only viable choices.)

Contrast this to today. We no longer really discuss operating systems. Between virtualized instances of operating systems and web-based computing, this topic has been made largely obsolete. And out of the (perceived) two-fold competition has blossomed a field of several dozen viable contenders. But there’s even more. Many emerging changes require us to be flexible, curious, and—to come back to Einstein—willing to change. Here are some of those moving targets:

- We now know that machine translation will play a role in many of our professional lives in the near future. Notably, though, this is no longer such a feared change.

Instead, it is a positive transformation, one that will prove to be another of many tools that we will use to enhance our productivity (as opposed to simply editing machine translation output).

- We long ago entered the age of collaboration where we use shared translation memories and term bases when working for technology-savvy clients, but it’s now easier than ever to organize these kinds of virtual workgroups with our peers.
 - With the advent of sub-segmentation, the concept of translation memory has changed. Many of us used to follow the “Big Mama” concept, where everything we worked on ended up in one mammoth translation memory. While some still do, most of us have turned our backs on that model to embrace translation memories of higher quality that in turn deliver higher-quality sub-segments.
 - Sub-segmentation and the corresponding techniques of AutoWrite, AutoComplete, writing with the Muse, or whatever the tool of your choice might call it, have also
- changed our approach to terminology. It’s become more important because we get it delivered right to our cursor as we type. This comes at a time when term handling and maintenance has finally become less cumbersome in most tools, and when external tools are becoming more fine-tuned to building up terminology resources and using them productively.
- Voice recognition has been around for a number of years and has long been praised as a tremendous productivity boost by its early power users. Now, many more are using it. What is exciting is that there seem to be real possibilities to make this technology available to translators in languages beyond the small number supported by the official Dragon NaturallySpeaking products.¹
 - Web-based translation environments have become ubiquitous. While most of us agree that they still lack some of the productivity features we are used to from our desktop translation environments, they have made huge progress and feature-parity is visible on the horizon.

Information and Contacts

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*, a perfect source for replenishing your arsenal of information on how human translation and machine translation each play important parts in the broader world of translation. Contact: jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com.

So, it's really no longer so much a question of *what* technology to use. Instead, it has become a question of *how* to use technology, and how to shape it in a way that fits your particular need.

Of course, this isn't where it stops. Here are some developments that will be necessary within the next few years:

- Tools will have to finally develop morphological abilities for a wide variety of languages. It remains to be seen who will develop this, but it will have to happen. Once we have that, the possibilities for term recognition, quality assurance, and fixing faulty translations automatically will be boundless.
- The concept of the "translation environment" will become more central to the imagination of tool developers—and not just to the developers of the actual translation environment tools. For instance, I think dictionary publishers will try to bring their content right into the translation environment where the translator needs it. And so will others.

- There will be increasingly creative ways to access external bilingual and monolingual data seamlessly. MemoQ has already paved the way for this with the successful implementation of a corpus tool feature that other tools will surely follow. Does this strike a creative chord as you begin to hatch your own ideas of what's possible? Please don't keep these to yourself. Be sure to communicate them to our community of translation professionals and developers.

Every translation professional is unique in the clients we serve, the languages we translate, the subject matter with which we work, and the technology we employ. What's common to all of us is that we need to be vigilantly and creatively on the lookout for the best suite of solutions. And since y'all agree with me that we're smart, it shouldn't be a problem for us to continue to change, right? ■

Note

1. See tinyurl.com/VoiceMoreLangs.

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that more and more, physicians and hospitals are no longer reimbursed per test or per procedure, but rather on the basis of the quality or outcome of the care they provide, and they are held accountable via penalties for poor outcomes (like excessive readmissions, for instance) and incentives for good outcomes. In other words, hospitals and doctors are ranked and reimbursed on the basis of the quality of the care they provide, and this quality is assessed by means of quantifiable, objective metrics like patient satisfaction or number of readmissions.

Now let's go back to this translation I reviewed and consider it in the light of an outcome-based system. Poorly translated patient materials do not just lead to frustration and extra work for hospital staff dealing with the inevitable confusion, but to

patients expressing their dissatisfaction in surveys or, worse, to misunderstandings with horrible consequences like overdosing or the need for readmission. Either way, the poor translation will eventually be reflected in the hospital's ranking, its reputation, and its pocket book.

Hospital administrators will not be fascinated by some all-purpose claim that expert translations "add value," but they might be interested to find out how a well-written, engaging patient brochure in English can effectively improve their hospital's metrics.

This is just one approach in one field, of course, and there are many ways to make this message relevant to potential clients. Have any of you taken advantage of current developments in your field of expertise to communicate the value of what we do? I'd love to hear from you. ■

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