



GeekSpeak

Jost Zetzsche

jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com

Learning the Tools of the Trade

A couple of weeks ago I

visited the Monterey Institute of International Studies and talked to one of the teachers of computer-aided translation. We discussed the challenges of teaching complex software tools such as translation environment tools to students who do not know how to properly handle their operating system or basic word processing. It is sort of like trying to teach someone to appreciate or even analyze the poetry of T.S. Eliot before they have read a first grade primer.

Now, do not get me wrong: operating systems like Windows, Macintosh, or Linux, or word processing applications like Microsoft Word or OpenOffice.org, are not like first grade reading primers. They are highly complex and sophisticated computer programs. But as with most everything else, it is not an either-or situation. These programs allow for proficiency on various levels. Still, it is crucial to understand the basics of managing your operating system, such as maintaining it properly so it

stays at the top of its processing capabilities. It is even more important in our case to know how to language-enable it, and to understand basic principles of converting file formats and dealing with Unicode or special characters in your word processor. If these basics are not in your repertoire, you will neither appreciate nor be effective in your use of complex systems that aid you as a translator.

My friend and I agreed that every one of her students should have to take a course in basic computer skills before even starting to tackle the much more complex tasks of translating with the aid of a computer. But I would not write this here if it were not true for more than just graduate students of translation studies. It is true for all of us.

Yes, the linguistic skills necessary for our profession form the very core of our competency. But to survive as a professional, we all need a business sense as well. One aspect of being a business professional is investing in

the various necessities of our business, including a working knowledge of the tools that we use. If we do not invest in learning the basic software tools on which or alongside which the more sophisticated programs run, one of two things will happen. We will either dread working with our main tool—the computer—so much that we lose passion for a task that we are otherwise highly qualified for—translation. Or we will become so ineffective with an unsophisticated technological setup that we will struggle to survive.

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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 also publishes a free technical newsletter for translators (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit).