GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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A Maze of TEnTs

Mazes of tents? Of course, I am not talking about tents made of fabric, poles, ropes, and pegs. Instead, I am referring to translation environment tools (TEnTs). As the name suggests, these TEnTs provide translators with an environment that allows them to work productively. This environment includes a translation memory and a terminology database, but it also provides features for quality assurance, spell-checking, workflow management, project management, analysis, support for complex file formats, and so forth. Anyone who has even glanced into the market of commercially available TEnTs will know about tools like Trados, Star Transit, Déjà Vu, and across, and it would be hard enough to make a choice among those. However, it becomes exponentially harder when you look more closely and find more than a dozen tools!

What can be done to find your way through this labyrinth of tools? Buy several or all the more common ones, or just use what your clients use? Maybe. But we are in an interesting age for tools. Surprisingly, we are observing the quasi-monopolization of TEnTs grinding into reverse (there truly is a greater variety of tools being used by all segments of our industry). At the same time, exchange formats (TMX for translation memories, TBX for terminology databases, XLIFF for translation files, and even Trados .ttx and bilingual RTF files) have made it possible to work together while still using separate tools.

Choices, choices! Here are a few strategies that may help you make a good choice for one (or maybe several) of the tools.

First, look at the differentiators and how they relate to you. There are many distinguishing characteristics, including price, availability of translated user interfaces and documentation into your preferred language, or the familiarity of the translation interface. For me, however, these proved to be secondary concerns. It was the following ones that finally helped me select my preferred tool:

- **Supported operating system:** This criterion used to be "hushed over" because there were hardly any non-Windows tools, but things have changed on that front.

- **Supported file formats:** This factor is obsolete if you work only in the more common file formats that are supported by virtually all the tools (MS Office, HTML, or XML). However, it is essential to consider if you work with text in formats such as Quark or InDesign or database content.

- **Exchange formats:** Exactly what exchange formats are supported? Do they match those used by your colleagues or clients?

- **Processing mode:** Does the tool process files on a one-by-one basis or in a batch mode (many files at once)? What is your preferred mode?

- **Support:** What kind of support does the vendor provide and how much does it cost? What kind of support does the user community provide?

While we are talking about user community support, another strategy is to ask colleagues or go to the user groups. User groups for most tools can be found on Yahoo! Groups. Just type in the name of the tool at www.groups.yahoo.com and you will find a link to the group. Do not look only for the experienced users in those groups, but check out the newbies as well and try to find out how their needs are being met.

Also, most tool vendors offer freely downloadable trial versions of their programs, some of which have a limited time use and others a limited functionality. This can be a good step to take if you have already narrowed your choice down to only two or three tools and now really want to dig in and find out about the ins and outs of those tools. Do not attempt this step too early, though. Trying to download, install, and test 15 different tools may very well cause you to lose your mind!

And then there are two ways that are both close to my heart.

Every year at ATA's Annual Conference, there is a Tools Forum, where many of the tool vendors have a chance to demonstrate and introduce their tools and be exposed to critical questions. You can always continue to ask additional questions after the Forum or see more demos in the Exhibit Hall area.

The second is a website (www.translatorstraining.com) that presents Flash-based demos of the 15 most common TEnTs (full disclosure: I am part owner of the site). In the videos—which were prepared by the tool vendors themselves and edited and narrated by us—every tool is shown processing the same file according to the same "script," making them very easy to compare. Most recently, we have also added videos that show how some of the tools work with TMX files and bilingual files that were prepared in Trados.

These are some good ways to find out which tool suits your needs. The most important thing is to go out and start using one. Do not let yourself be dazzled by the maze. Use some of the road signs I have just outlined and you will find your way out in no time.

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