GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com

All Translators Are Not Equal

All right, how is this for a novel fee schedule: effective immediately, translators will be paid by the degree that technology supports their language.

Let me explain. There would be three different levels of languages. Level 1 languages would include languages with full support in areas like voice recognition, optical character recognition, seamless support by translation environment tools, support by major online dictionaries and/or other language resources, and spell- and grammar-checkers. Level 2 languages would include those that are missing one or two of the tools listed above, and Level 3 languages would be those that are lacking more than two of those same enablers.

The fee scale would be calculated in the following manner. If you translate between two different Level 1 languages, you would earn 10% less per word than if you had a Level 2 language involved. With two Level 2 languages, you would make yet another 10% per word, and this would be the same as what a translator between a Level 1 and a Level 3 language would make… You get the point.

Can you imagine the rejoicing among our colleagues who translate Level 3 languages like Amharic, Indic languages, Inuktitut, Creole, or many other technically less-supported languages? Even translators of Level 2 languages like Arabic, Urdu, or Hebrew probably would not mind such a system. Only folks like me, who translate between two Level 1 languages—English and German— would be left in the dust.

Of course, this suggestion is not meant to be taken too seriously. However, it is designed to illustrate how the different levels of technological support among languages make it all the harder for translators of less-supported languages to achieve the same productivity enjoyed by their colleagues in highly supported languages.

How can we remedy this situation? How can, say, Amharic translators get access to the tools that would allow them to convert PDFs or scanned documents into computer-processable text, dictate text, or spell-check their documents with high-quality spell-checkers? While I do not have a ready-made answer, it seems that the only way to make any headway would be for those language groups to come together and demand it. A national organization for translators working in an under-supported language would be a good platform to begin a conversation with developers. Otherwise, large organizations such as ATA might also serve as a good starting point for coming up with creative solutions for developing tools.

Here are some ideas for what these solutions might entail:

- First of all, make sure that you truly know what is out there for your language. Sites like the Language Technology Resource Center (http://ltrc.mitre.org/Tools/reports/index.pl) list many more resources and tools for languages such as Arabic, Urdu, or Pashto than many translators in those languages might know about.

- Educate colleagues who work in the same language about what technology offers for your language today, or about such things as using Unicode rather than legacy fonts.

- Contact universities or other non-commercial entities that may have developed solutions, but have just not released them to the general public.

- Contact organizations such as RIFAL (www.rifal.org) that engage in developing conversions between legacy fonts and Unicode.

- Contact independent developers of existing tools and ask them what it would take to add support for your language.

- Find out what kind of grants might be available to support private development activities.

I am writing this column while sitting in the San Francisco airport, waiting for my flight to North Bend, Oregon, on a commercial flight that was established just a few weeks ago. North Bend is a mere 20-minute drive away from my home. Just six months ago, I never would have believed that there would be flights to my local area—for years I have been driving two hours to get reasonable flights from the next larger airport in Eugene. However, this local connection was made possible by local businesses from my area guaranteeing United Airlines a certain number of passengers, and promising to reimburse them for any discrepancy.

I am not sure that there is a direct correlation between my North Bend flight and the under-supported languages, but it is a good example of how businesses—and as translation agencies or freelance translators, we are businesses—can find creative solutions to change something that otherwise prevents greater productivity and tends to make folks just throw up their arms in despair. Let's use those arms to do something about situations that can be changed.

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