GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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The Joy of Using Text Editors

Text editors! I enjoy talking to groups of translators about computers and about what tools they should or should not use. Every single time, though, I get stuck on text editors. I think that I have yet to make a truly compelling case for why at least one text editor should be in the tool box of every translator—and it REALLY should!!

Maybe I should try to list my "Top 10" uses for text editors. But first, let's make sure that we are using the same nomenclature: "text-based file," also known as "flat file," refers to any file that is not a "binary file." Huh? Well, any file that is humanly readable (though not necessarily understandable) is a text-based file, and that would include .txt, .html, .xml, .rtf, .properties, and a huge variety of other files that, when opened in a text editor, display characters and numbers rather than crazy symbols. Binary files are "compiled files" that can only be opened and edited in one or two specific applications (such as .doc in Word, .ppt in PowerPoint, or .exe as a stand-alone executable file). If you open a binary file in a text editor and save it, you have broken it—forever and ever. (So it may be a good idea not to do it!)

Without further ado, here are my "Top 10" uses for a good text editor.

10. Opening large text-based files takes a fraction of the time it takes in an MS Office program (Excel or Word), so I open virtually any text-based file in a text editor.

9. Searching (and replacing) in any number of text-based files all at once.

8. Opening .html or other coded files. The text editor recognizes what is code and what is not, and separates it visually by using different colors.

7. Sorting glossaries and deleting duplicates, even across lines of different capitalization, all at once.

6. Opening binary files (but not saving them!) to find out what kind of file they are (if the extension is messed up). The first couple of characters often give a clue to their "true" identity: %PDF is a PDF file, BM is a Bitmap file, MZ is an EXE or DLL file, JFIF in the first line points to JPEG files, or PK to a ZIP file.

5. Viewing the source of websites to check out some clever coding or to see what kind of translation issues I am going to run into.

4. Searching for a term or expression in a file and having every instance of that term or expression highlighted all at once.

3. Checking for the validity of .xml or .html files (after I have translated them and may have messed something up).

2. Comparing files in an easy-to-see fashion to find out what kind of changes may have been introduced between different versions of the same file.

1. Switching code pages (to and from Unicode or between "native" code pages).

And the list goes on and on. I have found that if I can imagine some kind of logical operation within a text-based file, chances are that it can be done with a text editor.

There are a number of text editors out there. Of course, Windows comes with a super-simple text editor called Notepad (you can find it under Start> Programs> Accessories) that works fine for bare-bones operations. However, most of the above "Top 10" are not possible with it, so you should look into purchasing one of the third-party tools. There are a number of them out there, but my favorite at the moment is UltraEdit (www.ultraedit.com), which has sort of redeemed itself in my eyes because it now handles Unicode very well (make sure that you set things correctly under Advanced> Configuration> File Handling). Another great editor is EmEditor (www.emeditor.com), for which a large number of free add-ons are available on its site to do all sorts of fancy stuff. And there are many more tools available. Just make sure that they handle Unicode well. *ata*

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