



The Bookworm by Carl Spitzweg, 1850

The increasing role of technology in libraries has a significant impact on the changing roles of librarians. (...) Increasing technological advance has presented the possibility of automating some aspects of traditional libraries. In 2004 a group of researchers in Spain developed (...) a robot [that] is able to navigate the library, look for the specified book, and upon its discovery, carefully take it from the shelf and deliver it to the user. Because of the robot's extremely limited function, its introduction into libraries poses little risk to the employment of librarians, whose duties are [no longer] defined by menial tasks such as the retrieval of books.

Wikipedia: "Librarian," 2008

Of translators and librarians

There's a great contrast between Spitzweg's wonderful "Bookworm" painting of 1850 and the 2008 Wikipedia description of the use of technology by librarians. While the "Bookworm" provokes a poetic image, librarians today have been able to master and accept technology and thus, still play an important role today. In sharp contrast, the language industry – whose main character, the translator, has a historically similar poetic and romantic image – has chosen a different path. That's why our industry is currently experiencing such heavy turbulences.

By Jost Zetzsche

When Idiom, producer of *Idiom WorldServer*, arguably the most mature and advanced globalization management system, was added to service/technology provider SDL's remarkable tool chest on February 11, 2008, SDL not only paid the purchase price but also assumed a fair amount of debt. This debt had been accrued by Idiom in addition to the more than US\$60

million that had been invested into the company since its inception in 1998. It's not up to me to pass judgment on Idiom's management or possible lack of business savvy, but we still have to wonder: Is the language industry able to sustain independent companies that produce high-end technology solutions for translation and globalization purposes?

The answer to this question will determine whether the language industry will be run by

a handful of large service providers, armed with impressive arrays of tools that allow them to take on the biggest jobs, leaving the rest to those – to (mis)quote Wikipedia – whose "duties are defined by menial tasks such as the retrieval of words."

Don't get me wrong: I am a translator myself and with all my heart. And the retrieval of words is a good thing – but only once. For the second, third, and all successive times,

these words (or phrases or sentences) should be presented to the translator with the aid of advanced technology. Although this may be oversimplifying the issue – and tools like *Idiom WorldServer* certainly do much more than just “retrieving words” – it touches the heart of the matter: The language industry has embraced technology much too late, and is still adopting it much too hesitantly.

In a blog on Idiom’s website, a company representative reported from the *American Translators Association’s* annual conference in 2007: *I can remember when technology was viewed warily by many professional translators, but it’s safe to say that this is a historical artifact. Technology was front and center in the exhibit area, with a barrage of solutions on display. Our booth as well as most I saw were jammed with new and existing users, and there was a long line at the exhibit area doors every morning before opening time.*

Sadly, the events of the last few weeks teach us that this “historical artifact” was strong enough to topple Idiom. While the blog author may be right that lack of *interest* in technology is a thing of the past, there needs to be more than just interest to sustain independent technology vendors.

Of all the different groups within the translation sector – part-time and full-time translators, small and mid-sized translation agencies, large translation/technology providers, and

the various groups of translation buyers – the only groups that have already accepted and embraced technology are some of the larger translation buyers and the large translation service providers such as SDL, Lionbridge, and translations.com. These are in fact translation service AND technology providers. The majority of the other groups are still watching... interested, but unwilling to invest.

Another case also illustrates this dilemma: *XeLDA* was initially developed by the *Multilingual and Knowledge Management Solutions* division of the *Xerox Innovation Group*, and in 2003 it was acquired by the *TEMIS* group. *XeLDA* is easily the most advanced term extraction and glossary creation program for the 15 languages it supports, and it should have been a “slam dunk” for the *TEMIS* group to market this to the language industry and turn it into an even better tool in the process. Instead, if you’re lucky enough to find *XeLDA* buried on *TEMIS’* website, you’ll have a hard time understanding from its presentation there that this tool could actually be used for multilingual terminology work at all. And when I had a chance to talk to one of its developers, he confided that there hasn’t been any development on that aspect of the tool since the acquisition – because there did not seem to be any market. . . . So let’s come back to the question of whether independent translation and globalization technology vendors can be sustained: The language industry is a significant market, easily

capable of supporting these vendors... IF there is a willingness to invest in the technology. No one develops powerful products just because they’re interesting to look at. Companies develop products to be purchased. And it’s up to the small and mid-sized service vendors themselves to decide whether they want to be left outside or if they want to shape this appealing industry by putting their money where their interest is. We can’t afford to leave technological advances just to the big players.

contact



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