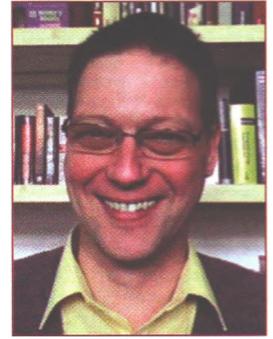


Jost Zetzsche

Warped perceptions of translation technology



In preparing a presentation for the recent Localization World Berlin event in June, I was once again struck by this fact: we as an industry, and I as someone who writes about translation technology, have bought into the perception that technology itself is a goal. In reality, it is nothing more than a tool at best and a container at worst.

Let's just look at the family of tools at the core of most of our business: translation memory (TM) and terminology maintenance applications. When we started using these tools in the early 1990s, they were not only essential to streamlining and improving our translation processes, but also to collecting electronic data: highly structured terminology databases and massive corpora or TMs. Now, almost two decades down the road, we're at a very different place. True, data is still being collected, but there are already massive amounts of that data sitting on our servers. And while we still need the tools to streamline and improve our processes, it's no longer the tools that are the driving forces. Instead, it is the data.

Considering this radical change in our — the users' — position in relation to that of the tool vendors, it's shocking to see that our perception has not changed. We're still enamored with those shiny tools. We feel threatened by the consolidation of tool vendors or tool and service vendors, and for the most part, we feel ourselves to be at the mercy of said companies, whom we think we have little influence on.

It's time for this change to become tangible. We are the ones who should be in the driver's seat.

During my talk in Berlin, a joint session from several buyers' perspectives that touched on how technology should be approached in our industry, I asked what is most important: data or its container? Knowledge or storing knowledge? Human interactions or automating workflows? The user or the tool? The answers are obvious, but sometimes it helps to bring it down to such a simple level.

So what can be done in practical terms?

Here are some ideas that may help us to get our priorities straight again, either in combination with each other or with some completely different ideas as well:

- We need to withdraw support from tool vendors who depend on competing services or proprietary formats.
- We need to support open source. Tools such as OmegaT and TinyTM or industry associations such as Forum Open Language Tools are some examples of passionate and highly-motivated initiatives.
- We need to continue to support standards and to force tool vendors to implement them. Yes, this has been said for many years now, but if you look at the level of implementation — especially of XLIFF, TBX, and GMX — there is still plenty for tool vendors to do.
- We need to support open data sources such as TAUS and TM Marketplace and some of the others that will doubtlessly appear in the next few months and years.

If there is one common denominator among all these points, it is the cooperation between service and tool vendors with a common vision. The single vendor will not be able to develop an individual tool set or find ways to access large amounts of data, but as a common initiative it is possible.

For a long time we have been saying that technology is a differentiator — and it still is. If vendors are not part of the fold of companies that are moving in the right direction technologically, they will differentiate themselves by being left behind. But besides focusing only on technology, we also need to focus on the other differentiator: us, the users. After all, it is we who enter the translations, build the relationships, and use the tools to serve us. **M**

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