



GeekSpeak

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The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost also publishes a free technical newsletter for translators (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit).

An Ode to Unicode

*To praise Unicode
In seventeen syllables
Is very diffic-*

(By Jan Hanna, one of the winners of the Unicode Haiku contest.

You can see more winning entries at <http://unicode.org/conference/uni-haiku.html>.)

I sometimes wish that the developers who first came up with the idea of Unicode had been a little less geeky about its name. “Unicode” sounds so technical, impersonal, and, well, geeky. To be sure, its technical underpinnings are highly complex and beyond the comprehension of mere mortals like you and me. In fact, it took the little team of developers from Xerox and Apple from 1987 all the way until 1991 to publish the first very limited version of Unicode (along the way they were joined by some folks from Sun, Microsoft, and a couple of other companies that have long since disappeared).

So why, if it is so very geeky, do we need to worry about Unicode? Because we do not need to worry anymore! That is the point. Unicode allows us to weave seamlessly in and out of different languages and writing systems. Language-specific “code pages” that made us worry about conversions, corruptions, and compatibility are (mostly) a thing of the past. And there is no group of people who benefits more from this than we do as translators.

If you are interested in some of Unicode’s more technical aspects, there is plenty of information easily accessible on the web or in some of the resources that I list here.

What I want to talk about today, however, is why I think a magical sounding name like Unicorn would be more fitting. To me, Unicode is the most beautiful and complete treasure chest of human written expression ever assembled. Its current version is made up of more than 100,000 characters of mostly written modern and

ancient languages. I can promise that if you start digging in that chest, you will find languages you have never heard of before. Languages like Carian, Lydian, or Lepcha. And you will find writing systems which may be somewhat familiar, but upon closer examination are so beautiful that I often catch myself with a really intelligent-looking open-mouthed expression that stands in remarkable contrast to the awe that these writing systems inspire in me. Writing systems like Cuneiform, Hebrew, Arabic, Glagolitic, and yes, even the Latin alphabet. I have been collecting some of my favorite characters over the years at www.internationalwriters.com/characters. As you browse, I hope you are infused with some of the same joy that their beauty inspires in me.

And here is another magical aspect of Unicode. Even its creators are still on a treasure hunt. At www.unicode.org/roadmaps/smp/#55 you can find what is currently on the treasure roadmap—scripts like Maya Hieroglyphics or the funky (and still undeciphered) Rongorongo. One that I saw recently for the first time was Sutton SignWriting (<http://std.dkuug.dk/JTC1/SC2/WG2/docs/n4015.pdf>), a system of characters that encompasses the signs of the vast majority of sign languages, expanding Unicode to include even more than just the written human expression.

And all of this to come in the near future in a Unicode treasure chest near you!

If you are interested in a great technical Unicode overview that you can carry around with you or send your clients (or contractors) as a lovely and educational gift, you can order the

Unicode Guide at www.barcharts.com/Inventory/Navision/9781423201809. You will find everything you ever wanted to know on the subject on six laminated tri-fold pages.

And if you really want to delve deep down into the Unicode treasure chest on actual printed pages, you might want to explore the 1,472 pages of the Unicode Standard (Version 5.0) at <http://unicode.org/book/aboutbook.html>. Unfortunately, it does not yet include a printed edition of the latest version of Unicode (6.0), but there is still plenty to discover in its depths.

In short, Unicode is a modern masterpiece, an artful blend of cutting-edge technology and the oldest forms of human written expression, and we would do well to marvel at it. As translators, we are in its debt. And if that makes us geeks, well, so be it.

*Normal people think
Haikus about Unicode
Are really nerdy.*

(By Caitlin Johnstone)

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