



GeekSpeak

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Avoiding the Leapfrog

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 is the co-author of *Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World*, to be released in October and already available for preorder on Amazon.

Imagine this. Your computer is a mere terminal with Internet access. Aside from a browser, it has virtually no programs installed. There is no data in any mentionable capacity stored on your terminal, and the data that you access to aid in your translation tasks is all stored online; a mixture of your own information and third-party data from a large variety of sources. How that data is presented to you in its first draft varies: some comes from machine translation engines, while other records emerge from translation memories, corpora, or glossaries. Electronic communication is not conducted via e-mail but through a mixture of social networks, file-sharing sites, instant messengers, and texting. Collaboration is built into any of the tools you use and is a natural part of any process. Most if not all data entry is controlled by voice rather than keyboard.

Twenty years ago—no, make that 10 or maybe even five years ago—this description would have sounded like science fiction. It would either have been greeted with disgust or that kind of nervous excitement I had when I read in the 1970s that within 20 years there would be cities on the moon and deep down in the oceans. But today, we realize that the translator’s utopia I have described will actually happen for many of us—and already has for some of us, in varying degrees.

It is up to us individually to decide whether a work environment like this is desirable, and if not, to look for the industries and clients that are unlikely to adopt it in the near future. No doubt they can be found. In fact, I feel very certain that those translators who have mostly shunned technology at their work stations and have still been able to work profitably will be able to continue doing so for a long time to come. It seems unlikely that clients who have

not asked for the use of technology in the translation process will do so in the near future.

But those translators who are already using today’s (or yesterday’s) translation technology will likely be confronted with transitioning into a work environment that resembles the utopia I have described.

We are in the beginning phases of the largest shift in technology since the widespread use of the personal computer. This trend takes neither a genius nor a prophet to predict. But the challenge may actually be most acute for those of us who were early adopters in the era when computerized translation technology first appeared.

My wife and daughter just returned from a month-long stay in rural India, and they confirm what you and I have read many times before. While some crucial services that we might take for granted, such as consistent power, cannot always be relied upon, more modern services like cell phone technology are very widely used and remarkably robust—more reliable, in fact, than here in the rural northwestern United States. This is what is

called leapfrogging. Early adopters of a previous technology are often so constrained by the infrastructure they built for it that they now have to bend to make work for newer technologies that are best supported by more modern infrastructures.

As we enter the new age of cloud computing, we need to be careful not to constrain ourselves with existing mental infrastructures. As I read through postings in newsgroups and talk to colleagues, I sometimes get the sense that there is a certain faithful allegiance to the technology that was adopted many years ago, a loyal logic that insists “if it was visionary then it must be visionary today.” But that is not how the development of technology works. We have seen it throughout history—what was truly visionary years ago may now already be an antique.

As inhabitants and drivers of a technological industry, it is up to us to open our eyes and embrace the new visions that are up for grabs, up there on the moon, under the sea, and in the cloud.

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