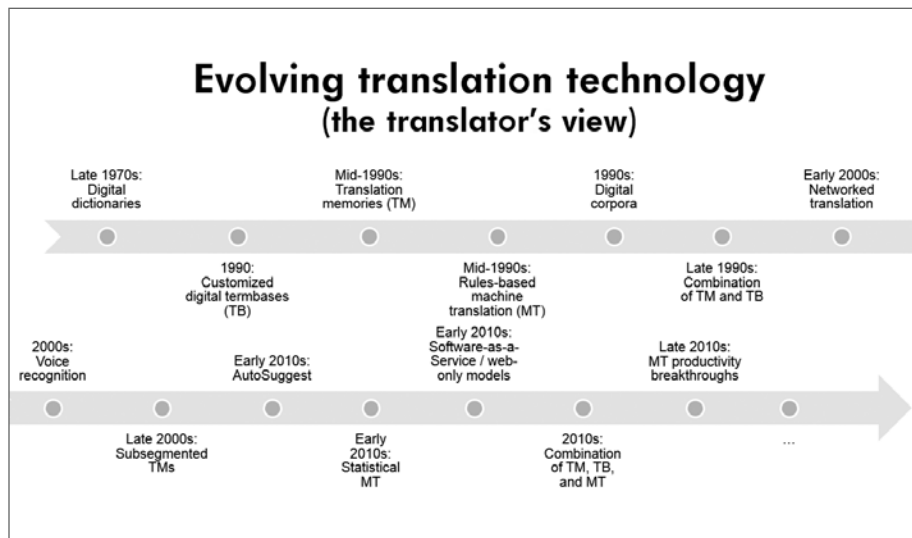


Learning from the Past

I found myself in an interesting position earlier this year when I was asked to speak at InterpretAmerica. This is a leading interpreting event that aims not only to bring together the different facets of the interpreting world, but also to act as a catalyst for new developments in the field, including technology.

My position was interesting because I'm not an interpreter, and the truth is that I really know very little about the field. But my interpreting expertise—or lack thereof—wasn't the reason why conference organizers Barry Slaughter Olsen and Katharine Allen invited me. Instead, they wanted an outside perspective on a separate but related world—translation—that would provide insights into the successes and failures translators have had in encountering new developments, especially technology.




Collectively speaking, of course, we translators have been very slow to accept technology as a positive and productive part of our lives, which in turn has had some negative impact on the development of new technologies. You know what I'm talking about. For the longest time, tools like termbase systems were really not built for our needs—because we neither showed interest as consumers nor were we willing to engage in the development process. Other technologies virtually disappeared because we didn't show the interest that was necessary to justify ongoing development.

So, I retold some of those and other stories as examples of what happens if you do (or don't) engage with technology. I also tried to put together a timeline from a translator's perspective of translation technology development. I came up with the graphic above. (Naturally, this would look different from the viewpoint of a translation company or academia.)

The dates in my graphic don't refer to when the respective technologies were made available, but when they began to be used—not only by single translators here and there, but by reasonably large

numbers. (And since “reasonably” should never be used in a serious historical overview, the dates could just as well be reasonably far off.)

What strikes me in this overview is that despite our initial (and ongoing) hesitation in employing translation technologies, we've come a relatively long way in a relatively short time. While it's also likely true that we could have come further if we had participated more actively in the process, I'm still happy with where we are. Translation technology today can become a straitjacket for the dependent translator. However, the independent translator has more opportunities at her fingertips than any time before to harness what machines do well to produce something that people do well. 



Jost Zetzsche is the co-author of *Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World*, a robust source for replenishing your arsenal of information about how human translation and machine translation each play an important part in the broader world of translation. Contact: jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com.

This 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.

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