GeekSpeak

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Blazing Trails That Never End

I recently asked myself why so many translators who are deeply engaged with translation technology do not continue their technological exploration and interest once they reach a certain level of expertise.

Just so you know, no one has ever accused me of being too subtle. So, just to make sure that we are all on the same page, the example I will be using here is intended as a caricature, or a description in which, according to *Merriam-Webster*, "certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect."

In that spirit, imagine the life of a typical successful, "technically adept" translator. Our composite translator probably reached this point in life through one of two paths.

Following one path, they[1] receive a translation degree and—depending on the era and location—attain a certain level of technological proficiency through instruction (which will reflect the allegiances of the corresponding professor and school). Once they have launched out "into the wild," they apply what they have learned and continue to refine their use of technology to their particular needs and circumstances. When they have reached a level of competence with which they feel comfortable, they consider themselves well equipped and stop looking for improvement.

On the other route, the self-trained translator looks for technology solutions by searching the web, newsgroups, and translator portals and by going to conferences or talking to colleagues. They find a first set of technology that they settle on, though in the early years they continue to change or tweak it as they learn more about the industry. Once they have assembled a suite of tools that work for them, however, they feel well equipped and stop looking for improvement.

You will not have missed the commonality between the two: in the "end" they feel well equipped and see no room for further improvement.

"Feel Well Equipped"

For many years, it has been easy to share a wide variety of opinions in topic-oriented discussion forums, going all the way back to the LANTRA-L list and CompuServe's Foreign Language Education Forum (FLEFO). Today, it is actually hard *not* to express ideas through all-pervasive blogs (and responses to blog posts), Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and others. For our "successful and technically adept" translator, it is even harder to abstain. After all, good translators also have above-average writing skills and know how to express themselves very effectively. When they describe persuasively the technology they use as one of the cornerstones of their success, they realize quickly that it earns them admiration and a leadership position among their peers.

"Stop Looking for Improvement"

They embrace gradual change in the technology they are already using because they are able to integrate it quickly into their expertise portfolio, thus retaining their position as one of the public champions of "their" technology. But the more fundamental paradigm changes—where the existing technology is replaced completely with something new—are more difficult. Really difficult, in fact. These threaten to challenge their hard-earned status and identity as a community leader, and might even imperil the important business opportunities that arise from that identity.

So what do they do? They use their status to rail against the new technology, converting the perceived identity threat into a platform that allows them to predict doom for the community as a whole. Since they do indeed have considerable influence, especially among less experienced translators, their rallying cry becomes the rallying cry of many, with the result that the natural and ever-ongoing development of technology gets stuck.

Remember, this is a caricature. Still, if we are honest, do we not recognize a kernel of truth in the midst

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Information and Contacts

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,* a perfect source for replenishing your arsenal of information on how human translation and machine translation each play important parts in the broader world of translation. Contact: jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com.

of my hyperbole? And since I am calling for honesty, I am very specifically not excluding myself from the same guilt.

What can be done to avoid these knee-jerk responses that have the potential to stagnate technologically an entire generation of translators? I can think of three things.

First, we need to de-politicize the situation. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines "politics" as "activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization." If even some of my exaggerated illustration is true, we are dealing with politics rather than arguments based only on fact. Once we recognize the

difference between politics and fact, discussions about the future of translation technology should become much more productive.

Second, we might need a change of values. Expertise should be rewarded, but only if it does not promote stagnation. By its very essence, technology undergoes constant development. Those intrepid translators who master today's technology while continuously exploring new possibilities—embracing some and rejecting others—should be rewarded with the most prestige in the community.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly and practically, I would love to see developers of technology reach

out to the language community—and language community leaders in particular—to make them part of the development process. Not only will this raise the likelihood of creating a successful product that benefits the community, but it will develop technology champions in the process. ◼

Note

1. To avoid committing to a gender-based pronoun for my composite translator, I have chosen to use the grammatically unfortunate but gender-neutral third-person plural throughout.

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agree with me, which I also welcome. My opinion is just one of many, and there might be many better ideas and approaches than

mine. It is a column, not a court order, so you can always feel free to ignore whatever I write and do exactly the opposite. Keep me posted!

• Finally, it is time to thank you, the reader, for keeping this column around as long as you have. Thanks for your support and enthusiasm. Here is to many more years of The Entrepreneurial Linguist column—if you will have me. ◼