

GeekSpeak

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How Developments in Translation Technology Are Creating New Business Models

The editors of

the Globalization and Localization Association (GALA) newsletter (see www.gala-global.org/node/86538) recently asked me this question: What is translation technology doing to create new business models in the industry that are finding new and innovative solutions to current problems?

I would like to share with you a portion of my response below. Please note that some of my suggestions may be more relevant to language services providers beyond the size of a single-person freelance business.

Some obvious developments in technology must be taken into account to respond to the above question. Uppermost in many language professionals' minds is the much-written-about impact of machine translation. Increased process automation as well as relatively new processes, such as large-scale crowdsourcing, also rely heavily on technology. The increasing availability of bi- and multilingual data can (only) be harnessed with technology. At the same time, there are new ways to drill down to a much more granular level in these or any other data resources.

A superficial observer could easily conclude that these and similar developments would lead to a more monolithic landscape of larger companies equipped with ever-evolving state-of-the-art technologies that rely increasingly less on human contributions, whether on the project management side or on the translation side.

But here is what I think. In the 1990s, technology made us into the industry that we are today. In the 2010s, technology will pulverize the very industry it once created into many fragments.

Let me first digress a little before picking up this thread again.

An interesting blurb about Amazon removing from its website public domain titles translated using Google Translate appeared the week before I wrote this column (see <http://bit.ly/1eWc9OO>). Though most GALA members are not involved in translating literature, the report still seems emblematic to me. As members of the “translation industry,” we have known for a long time that translation does not equal translation, and apparently this has finally and truly penetrated the consciousness of the general public. Sure, “they” always knew about and delighted in Google Translate blunders, but the sheer volume of stories in the media—and their popularity—has continued to reveal a certain infatuation with the presumed up-and-coming babelish devices that will essentially put an end to the translation industry.

This new (or maybe it is just a dawning) revelation in the public awareness of the different kinds of translation is fantastic news for everyone who provides translation services.

For a long time in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we were able to use translation technology, in particular

translation memory technology, before clients realized it and insisted on reaping some of its financial and administrative benefits. This time, however, it is different. Now we are using technology as a selling point.

Today, we must learn to communicate with more nuance and sophistication about what *kind* of product the technologies that we use are producing. In the past, we made the mistake of proclaiming that we were not only selling “translation” but also “localization” services (whose meaning neither we nor our clients really understood). This time around we need to be wiser in communicating what we do. We must craft compelling and well-informed stories that describe what we provide.

In fact, these stories are so important that I think the very survival of each language provider is at stake here.

You see, the product sold by the large multinational technology/language provider to its clients is by definition different from the product of a small language services provider run by (former) translators and catering to a specific market. This in turn is different from the product of a mid-sized language services provider focused on maintaining and refining industry-specific machine translation engines. I could go on and on. ➡

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.

Naturally, the differences between the products are not just determined by the size of the vendor, but this certainly heralds the demise of the translation-editing-proofreading model where everyone sells at more or less the same prices based on word count.

In theory, technology can be a great equalizer. In practice, however, access and expert use of technology is not equal, so in many cases technology differentiates rather than equalizes. With that in mind, it is now up to every single vendor who sells translation to embrace that reality, crafting it into a narrative that explains what is being sold, how the product is unique due to the vendor's particular choice of technologies and processes, and how that justifies the price tag.

Granted, the Amazon story will not help you much in this process of communicating to clients. No serious competitor is going to use unvetted Google Translate to compete for your business. But having a profound and well-reasoned understanding of the implications of technology choice and how it can impact the quality and success of your product—and that of

your competitors—will help you flesh out what you are selling.

Here are some of many parameters you might want to use in crafting your story:

- What are your ongoing efforts in maintaining machine translation engines (if you use that technology)? If you have decided not to use machine translation, why?
- What guided your decision to choose your workflow/project management system, and what are the failsafes to deal with automation?
- How are the relationships with your vendors? Do you rely on a faceless mass or a select few? What is your qualification process? And what role does technology play in all of this? (These criteria may sound a bit old-fashioned, but they can still be woven into powerful stories.)
- If you use crowdsourcing, what are your models, your technology, and your failsafes?

- How do you use and vet external data from non-machine translation sources?
- How do you extend the use of your clients' data beyond the typical perfect/fuzzy match paradigm?
- Who and what technologies are involved in your quality assurance testing services?

The Translation Automaton User Society predicts that the demand for “boutique-style, specialist translation could grow tremendously.” I agree that the growth will be tremendous, though I am not sure that “boutique-style” is the correct term. “Boutique-style” seems to imply little niche businesses. Instead, I believe that just like today, the companies that provide translation will range from very small to relatively large businesses, with the largest load of work carried by the small and mid-sized companies. The primary difference will be that the use of technology will be more creative and the narratives will be more compelling. ■

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