GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche
jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com

Hard Times Bring Opportunities

At this point, it is anybody's bet what the economy will look like by the time this column is published, but as I write, the Dow Jones is somewhere in the 8000s and economically things are looking rather dire. Who knows—maybe you will be looking at this in a few weeks and thinking back on those golden days when the Dow Jones was still above the 5000 mark. Or maybe you will already have shrugged it off as one of those temporary economic glitches, and you will not have much time to read this because times will be so busy again. Be that as it may, times like these when our national or global economy is struggling can feel threatening to translators, or they can be viewed as real opportunities.

It is certainly an opportunity to teach our clients that right now is precisely not the time to cut the translation budget. In fact, just the opposite is true.

But since marketing is not my expertise, I would like to talk about another opportunity. Why don't we use the slow times to teach ourselves the things that in normal times we just do not have the time for? Why not take inventory of our computing environment, reevaluate what is helpful and what is not, and then go out on a discovery hunt to track down the tools that will help us gain the edge we have always wanted and that we will need once times get busy again.

The thing about tools is that they can be a real blessing, but they can also be a curse if they are not handled well. So (you know what is coming), this might be the perfect time to remind ourselves to invest the time to learn the tools that will make us more efficient translators.

Most of you have heard about the 5% or 10% percent rule with Microsoft Word. Researchers tell us that this is as much as the normal user ever uses, while the remaining 90% or 95% stays untouched. (In fact, the most-often-used command, Paste, accounts for 31% of all command usage!) Now that is okay for Word because it truly is one of those tools that is made for anyone and everyone, and if you do not know how to do a mail merge or draw an organizational chart, who cares (unless you need to do a mail merge or draw a chart).

But I would argue that it is a little bit different with translation environment tools (TEnTs). These are tools that were not just made for anyone and everyone; they were made specifically for us. While it is likely that we will never use all the features that Wordfast, Déjà Vu, or MemoQ offers (and you may replace these product names with any of the other dozen-plus tools out there), it behooves us to know that these functions are there, and it would be even better if we could see them in action at least once.

I have often talked to people who complain that it is relatively easy to get a first introduction into a TEnT, but it is not easy to get to the meat of the matter. This criticism is partly justified, but it is also true that while literally every user will have to know the basic steps to get started, the usage then varies greatly and it is just much harder to cover all the many specialized aspects of the tools (and there are many of these—I do not call them "translation *environment* tools" for nothing!). And aren't forays into the feature jungle of our tools what times like these can be used for? Some of the tools come with relatively good documentation and others are admittedly less well endowed; however, there is no function that cannot be explored with either the help of the documentation and/or the typically very supportive user groups that you can find at groups.yahoo.com.

Here is one way of beginning to get to know your tool. Usually these tools have one or two many-tabbed dialog boxes, often called something like "Options," "Preferences," or "Settings." This is what I like to call the command center—it is usually here where the majority of settings for the tool are defined. While it might feel a little dry to click yourself through these options, do you by any chance remember how dry it felt to learn the grammar and long list of terms for a foreign language? And see where that has gotten you! Why don't you use the same kind of spirit with your computer?

If you have never taken the plunge to purchase one of these tools, now is the time. Maybe you had a chance to talk to some of the vendors at the recent ATA Annual Conference in Orlando, or you showed up at the Tool Forum there and have a pretty good idea which tool would fit you. Otherwise, go to the websites of the various tool vendors, or maybe more effectively to the user groups mentioned above or to a site like translatorstraining.com, where you can compare tools in a one-to-one fashion.

When all is said and done, let us hope that there will not be too much time left for improving our skills—and that we will have ample time to use and hone those skills again on the job, in the trenches, where the real work is being done.

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