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Review

## TranslatorsTraining.com

*Reviewed by Ignacio Garcia & Vivian Stevenson*

**Site offers translators a pre-purchase look at tools**

**J**ost Zetzsche's new site [TranslatorsTraining.com](http://TranslatorsTraining.com) puts a uniform comparison format to translation environment tool (TEnT) vendors so that you can see before you buy. Freelancers can now dabble before they take the plunge, while developers are offered a forum and a standard to attain and maintain.

Pity the poor investor these days – so many different companies trying to attract your hard-won resources by promising an increase in your fortunes when you buy a share in theirs. With such a diversity of offerings, it's difficult to gauge performance and pick which option (or options) will work best for you – or even where to start. So not surprisingly, a peripheral business has grown up in the provision of comment, newsletters and reports to help us make an informed choice. The only thing is that we're not talking here about the stock market and portfolio gurus, but rather about translation memory (TM) products and Jost Zetzsche's [Translators Training.com](http://TranslatorsTraining.com): a paid-access, try-before-you-buy evaluation aid to help us sift through the ever shifting offer of what Zetzsche prefers to call TEnTs.

In this venture, Zetzsche has paired up with Intrawelt, an Italian company with expertise in e-learning. The stated aim is clear: to provide "independent, unbiased information about translation software tools" to make the translator's job easier and more productive. The founding idea is simple, cutting through the marketing claims and techno-speak with a truly practical translator's proposition. Thirteen TEnT tool vendors were given a small Word document and asked the same question: "Using your tools, what's the best way to translate this?" The vendors provided the screen-captures according to

strictly worded instructions, Zetzsche himself wrote the text, and Intrawelt created the final presentations.

### The opening

Zetzsche's web-based sampling and monitoring of products are intelligent ways of addressing an agile and volatile sector. Until now, all we have had to guide us through the maze of different TM offerings and the marketing hype of tool vendors have been whatever we could glean from fellow translators, other peers in professional lists, and experts in professional journals. Before [TranslatorsTraining.com](http://TranslatorsTraining.com), the only real way to educate oneself was to sign on for a trial period, download the available demo, and assess the required learning effort before making the decision – with assessment complicated for new players by a lack of experience and criteria. Multiply that effort by the several different competing/complementary brands and that means a big expenditure of time and effort.

It can be argued that the first real attempt to systematically compare computer-aided translation (CAT) or TM tools was the cheekily named *CAT Fight!* feature on ProZ.com, which ran roughly from 2003 to 2005. While it lasted, *CAT Fight!* gave ProZ.com's TM users the possibility of rating their tool on some 40 features ranging from "automatic terminology lookup" to "missing segment detection and format and grammar checks" and "background memory," "link to MT," or "TMX compliance" (while earning *brownie* points at the same time).

In doing this, contributors were giving prospective purchasers a useful rundown to help in the final, fateful purchase decision. And the sum of the subjectivities of all those doing the rating somehow gave an objective outlook to the result. *CAT Fight!* has now sadly ceased its



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prowling, with all traces disappearing from the site by early 2007. It was an ambitious project, well ahead of its time and well regarded by ProZ.com members.

TranslatorsTraining.com is not aiming so high – yet – but it shows potential. After all, Zetzsche has a track record of producing simple, worthwhile ideas to meet practical translator needs. He is the author of *A Translator's Tool Box: A Computer Primer for Translators*, an electronic book now in its sixth edition, and of the electronic biweekly *The Tool Kit* newsletter ([www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit](http://www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit)), now well past its one hundredth issue.

The newsletter idea was neat. Fully free during its first period, it remains so, but now has some premium content available only to those who ante up the \$15 yearly subscription. In this way, Zetzsche retains a big pool of recipients and correspondingly higher potential revenue from advertisers while also getting a bit extra from the more enthusiastic among us.

No criticism on this. Zetzsche is in business, and what he offers is worth the outlay. The TranslatorsTraining.com site looks like another idea from the same mold.

## Spoiled for choice

Figures on actual adoption of TM by freelancers are hazy. In his video presentation on the TranslatorsTraining.com site, Zetzsche himself argues that 80% of translators do not use TM, at least not to any meaningful degree.

Effectively adopting TM is not as easy as it may seem because it entails a way of working that is very different from the word-processor we are all used to. Unlike the straight layout of a word-processing page, cluttered TM editors force one to focus on the segment, not on the text, which may constrain rather than trigger the flow of mental activity. TM is an obtrusive tool that we need to learn and adjust to before we can achieve the gains in productivity it promises. Thus, a worldwide survey of professional translators reported by Elina Lagoudaki in *MultiLingual* #86 March 2007 showed that out of the 874 translators who responded, 82.5% used TM – but tellingly, 16% of the non-users had indeed bought it, but hadn't managed to actually learn to use it.

To pursue the financial analogy, most of us these days feel we need to be participating in the stock market, but doing so implies time, research and risk. The same holds true with TMs or TEnTs: feeling somehow pressured to be a part of things, yet not knowing exactly how to, means you risk making a panic purchase that will never fulfill its promise because it's based on emotion, not reason – hence all those products sitting unused on hard drives, as resistance grows to throwing good time and money after bad.

Normally, the first step on the way out of the labyrinth is to consider what work you do or would like to be doing. TM is indisputably a must for hard-core localization jobs, in which you must recycle previous translations, follow a given terminology, and apply the stipulated QA checks. In these cases, there will



Course selection page at TranslatorsTraining.com.

probably be a specific tool or even a specific version you've been asked to use. No confusion about choices there.

However, as TMs morph into TEnTs and the power and scope of the technology grow, so the applications increase and start to touch on new areas. And while the changes might not be on your personal horizon now, the perception among pundits is that this will not be the case for much longer.

## Which one?

Whatever the reasons for buying a TM, it takes time for the individual translator to get used to working with it. Moreover, this seldom means learning the technology in any general sense, but rather acquiring familiarity with one particular TM product – the one we've spent our money on, the one we've spent many hours learning, and the one we spend most of the time with. All that investment in time and effort means strong

attachment – witness the TRADOS versus Déjà Vu or TRADOS versus Wordfast “wars” in professional lists over the years. When peer pressure or client demands force a move to a different translation environment, the typical translator understandably resents it.

Despite the ascendancy of TRADOS, there has not been yet a consolidation in this small market, which lacks any real clear-cut default standard in the way that, say, MS Word is for word processing. Rather than the industry concentrating in fewer hands with more resources, the process has been the reverse, with new entrants dividing the scarce translation dollar and thus hindering the concentration of resources required to make solid advance. John Hutchins has been compiling a *Translation Software Compendium* since 1999 ([www.hutchinsweb.me.uk/Compendium.htm](http://www.hutchinsweb.me.uk/Compendium.htm)). In its first issue, he listed some 15 products; the last, June 2007, some 31 are listed, and the list is not exhaustive. There is no substantial R&D money forthcoming, such as the kind pumped by governments into machine translation. TM development is purely a translation industry affair, and the translation industry, in comparison with really major ones, is very small.

As a result, we currently have some solid old products dragging along “tried but tired” legacy code, together with untested ones offering fresh but unproven approaches. We have standard sentence-based TM, text-based (bi-text) TM, and “second generation TM” with language-specific algorithms to promote re-use at sub-segmental level. There are open standards-based products, and products that are open source. Some programs are only web-based. Some are restricted to in-house use. Those available off the shelf range from freeware to pricey, multi-user licenses with varying features and ongoing support/upgrade costs. It would be a full-time job just to keep track of things as they now stand, but they also happen to be continuously evolving.

## The line-up

Within this confusing melee, Translators Training.com offers us a quite comprehensive – and what will presumably be a progressive – snapshot of contemporary market offerings. The 13

tools represented on Zetzsche's site (across, Déjà Vu X, Heart-some, Lingotek, MemoQ, MetaTaxis, MultiTrans, OmegaT, SDLX, Similis, Trados 2007, STAR Transit and Wordfast) are introduced by a 50-word text written by the developer – all marketing spin allowed. A comparison chart of the 13 is provided – not perfect, but capturing all the nuances we have mentioned above in just one table is a big task.

The presentation for each tool lasts for ten minutes. Remember, the viewer does not interact with the tool, so this is about the right amount of time to engage without exceeding one's attention span. The tour does not pretend to cover the relevant areas in any depth, but gives enough information about the basic workings and the "translation philosophy" of the program to make the experience an educational one.

After a beta testing period, the website was made public just before Christmas 2007. It contains a short and fully free video introduction by Zetzsche, and a 25-second preview of each tool that is also free, but requires basic registration of user name and password (it's good to know what the demand is and where it's coming from).

Paying customers have access to the premium content of up to ten minutes tutorial for each tool, which comes at the price of 34.99 euros per year. This is essentially a continuation of the successful newsletter strategy, but we wonder if the very short "teasers" are more of a turn-off. Now, perhaps if the preview were to go for around five or so minutes, even more people might sign on to see how each one ends.

As most of us would agree, a big part of personal resistance or openness to a TM tool is its user interface, and there should be enough in these presentations to decide whether a particular environment works for you. One caveat, though: you also need to consider other issues such as support and general industry acceptance or compatibility before you buy.

Without giving too much away, each complete presentation has been designed to talk you through a mini translation project from start to finish, covering workflows, database and terminology management, and final product. Experienced users can see how competitors or new versions stack up, while beginners will benefit from the step-by-step tutorial aspect.

However, given that the overall aim of the site is to help individual users decide which product to download for purchase or at least a pre-purchase trial, even more useful/detailed information could be expected. More premium content has been promised, and the possibilities are there. For example, it would be nice to have some additional sub-ten minute tutorial comparisons of well selected, easy-to-isolate single features such as QA items or facts about specific compliance with the latest TMX or XLIFF standards, to which many vendors tend to pay more lip service rather than actual adherence. None of this should be too difficult since Zetzsche's book, newsletter and articles show that isolating particular features is something he is rather good at.

## Evaluation and future

At this stage of the technology's development, there is a profusion of competing programs. It is a big step to choose our first TM or to move to a new one. Your choice can represent a considerable outlay in monetary terms and a crucial investment or liability for your professional future. Thus, whether you are an old hand or a novice, the industry's state of flux is exposing a need for a firm anchor point, and with generalized support Translators Training.com could potentially fill that role.

From a developer's point of view, TranslatorsTraining.com is also a great plaza in which to show one's wares. In fact, given its performance-based focus, should the site become truly popular, failure to have a presence there might even come to be interpreted by the market as tacit admission of not cutting it.

Some lessons can also be learned from *CAT Fight!* Just why did it disappear? We could speculate that it was causing ProZ.com management too many headaches. At some point one could suppose conflict between the membership's uncensored comment and ProZ.com's desire for advertising revenue. On the users' side, too, there was an important issue concerning which tools were represented, and ProZ.com did not appear to have been as transparent as planet web now allows and essentially demands.

In a venture like Zetzsche's, independence and transparency are therefore paramount, and happily, he seems to share this belief, continually stressing the site's "objective, unbiased and independent information." Regarding which tools to include/exclude, the current list indicates Zetzsche is open on this, but a clearer idea of his inclusion/ exclusion criteria would be welcome. After all, if the site does achieve a high profile, a lot will be read into who is on the list.

Tool vendor advertising is not present yet, but may foreseeably be bundled with future premium content – as indeed happened with *The Tool Kit* newsletter. *The Tool Kit* has shown that Zetzsche is able to reconcile vendor advertising with editorial independence, and he must make sure he does the same here. The problem is not explicit advertising, but implicit endorsements or favoritism – the mere perception of which can be fatal.

Despite the essential "level playing field" premise behind the site, any considerable success could arouse temptations to make it a money spinner, especially if sold off later to another concern. The greatest asset here is objectivity, lack of bias and independence, and, if that becomes compromised, the inherent value will be lost.

In summary, TranslatorsTraining.com is an economical way for us to keep tabs on an area of critical interest. It is also potentially valuable to freelancers, tool vendors and the future of the technology as a whole, as a rallying and reference point for the various facets of TM to advance under the TEnT banner for years to come. It's a simple yet far-reaching idea that deserves a closer look. **M**