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Innovation in the Language Community
By Jeannette Stewart

Seneca, the Roman dramatist and rhetorician, wrote, “You will greatly enhance your reputation if you give old words new meaning.” No language stays the same and neither do the tools we use nor our community. Everything changes. We constantly coin new words and phrases, extend the meaning of the words we use and drop archaic ones. Supposedly dead languages like Latin find new life in the hands of enthusiasts as they update and innovate. We encourage and support speakers of endangered languages to seek out new generations of users who will preserve and extend their cultural heritage. We even see entirely new languages being invented and taken up by dedicated communities. It is a fundamental characteristic of languages to possess a life of their own, to be dynamic and avoid stasis. In this respect, we can’t apply a rigid pattern of behavior to language, which is characterized by persistence and rebirth. The language community can surely lay claim to being one of the most vibrant and innovative in existence, a claim doubled in recent times with the breakneck speed of technological progress. But it seems to me that the language community, along with others, have become fixated on innovation brought on by technology automation, and this is at the expense of recognizing the human elements of innovation in the industry. I believe this is an appropriate time to examine recent developments that we have seen and perhaps to provide a wider context for all aspects of innovation involved in our multilingual world from people to machines.

Time was the Rosetta Stone represented the forefront of translation technology. Translations had an influential part to play in the work of classical rhetoricians and the work of those Greek scholars involved in the creation of the Septuagint. The history of Indian and Chinese languages also innovated with the works of myriad authors. Arabic translators created translation movements in the Islamic world as knowledge was assimilated from older sources. The one common thing all of these old traditions have in
the form that they’ve come down to us is a dependence on writing. The scriptoriums of the Middle Ages indicate how a world hungry for knowledge was fed. Clearly interpreters found their services in demand down through the years as trade and diplomacy started to spread. Certainly innovations like the printing press increased the intellectual food supply, but essentially the means of production remained in the same vein year after year until we fast forward to recent times and advent of the computer era. There are many in our community who will recall just how swiftly innovation after innovation have occurred and the revolution that has transformed multilingual communications around the world.

**Innovation driven by industry specific problem-solving**

For sure, computers, software and Big Data have propelled us forward at light speed and resulted in many new members joining the language industry. But we would be in error to give all the credit for progress to the IT sector. In the early days of personal computing, it’s easy to forget the trials we went through, for example, with multilingual fonts! The contemporary language industry also can attribute its growth to an influx of people from marketing and advertising as well as IT. What these two industries have in common is innovation. They both are presented with problems and need to come up with solutions that have never been done before.

Corporate advertising and marketing departments bring a highly specialized set of skills to the business community as a whole. They have an understanding of how products and services offered to a multilingual market need to preserve the characteristics of their brands. However, as the global economy began to develop, they brought innovation to their role and this naturally impacted language use. As consumers we are often not entirely aware of the influence that advertising and marketing have in bringing products to highly diverse markets. The role that language plays in maintaining what works in one language when it is rendered into others requires equally specialized skills in multilingual innovation.
Particularly with the advent of the World Wide Web and global online presences, localization, internationalization and globalization have all become mission-critical initiatives that cover the full stack of business practices. We've all seen the microscopically-miniaturized labeling and product documentation that enrages more than it informs. However, online documentation provides much more consumer-friendly forms. And it can render multiple varying character sets thanks to Unicode and other documentation standards. Let’s not forget, however, that the Unicode we use and love today was not always so appreciated. Describing the ins and outs of the Unicode story is a book-length task. Let it simply be said that it is thanks to the innovative, organizational and technical skills of the Unicode community that we have the lexical equivalent of a Swiss-Army Knife with hundreds of blades.

The IT people created the language technology to boost productivity and consistency across a variety of languages and marketing professionals fed in business development and the client service that created verticals and value add-ons. But with these developments almost taken for granted, it’s too easy to overlook the language side of the business, but here is where we need to pay attention to the innovation, problem solving and strategies used by linguists every day. In my own time as an LSP, I recall the challenge of managing a project to translate a user guide for virtual reality where the translators had to understand some very innovative terminology in English and then to capture its quirkiness in their own language. Another challenge was posed by text wrapped round sophisticated graphics in beautifully designed documents presenting the findings of the Human Genome Project to the European Parliament. Oh, and the project deliverables were required within a few days... and nights! The lessons I learned from these experiences have stayed with me and have given me great faith in what innovation can achieve with languages, technology and our professional and motivated community.

On this last point, it is worth emphasizing again that our community is special because we really care first and foremost about our languages and how best we can marshal our skills to overcome difficulties in uniting people across the globe. Problem-solving is obviously key in this and is now being studied in
Taking multilingualism to a new level...

Innovation leads us away from making the same old mistakes over and over. We may make new mistakes, but what might seem like a pitfall can of course be turned around into an asset by teaching us something new. Seneca had a point!

**Innovation driven to explore new markets**

To explain further, we can learn a lot from what has happened with advertising. The internet explosion that took place in the 1990s precipitated a multitude of changes, many unforeseen. The advertising industry of the period was dominated by huge corporate agencies, who made good use of technology until they found themselves floundering as it began to swamp them. The appearance of Google in the late 90s and Facebook soon after initiated a seismic change in how advertising worked as technology began to drive the market. We are all aware of how our data has become a precious commodity to the tech industry. The consequence for advertising has resulted in a radical shift in how companies wishing to advertise now target their audiences. Less and less do we find ourselves flipping through glossy magazines with their mass-marketed campaign ads. In fact, that targeting is becoming refined to the point where we as individuals find ourselves being enticed to click. The lesson, a tough one to accept, is follow the tech.

Can our community really benefit from adopting a similar shift in how our work is delivered to its audiences? I believe we have no choice. To paraphrase the old writer’s adage: we need to show, not tell. By this I mean that telling the world that it needs human translation will fall short of bringing about substantive change. We need to put our skills out there using new platforms that enable linguists to showcase them. If we can adapt our work to these emerging targets, the language industry will evolve and we shall survive as a fitter, smarter community of professionals forging a truly cutting edge in multilingual communications. But where to begin?

Taking a view of the bigger business picture, I believe we really need to address how to insert language, or more precisely languages, into standard business models. What can we do as a community to create
more demand for our skills and services? Jeffrey Hammerbacher, Silicon Valley aristocrat for his roles in Facebook and Cloudera, his own data-analysis company, famously said that, “The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads. That sucks.” His dissatisfaction with the established business model of devising ways and means of interacting with webpages, all of which we’re familiar with, led him to innovate methods of data management using machine learning and advanced data analytics. Should we not be engaging the same level of entrepreneurial innovation with languages if we are to make a quantum leap that will position us in a deserved place in the global business hierarchy? Given that tech seems to be developing a much more interactive environment between users and machines, we have to be aware of the potential for making translations equally responsive as sources. The translation might even involve spoken words. The question is, will those words be machine-generated or come from a highly-qualified human interpreter? Time will tell. Or will someone in the language community seize an opportunity to disrupt the mainstream with some revolutionary new idea? When we stop looking inside our home-based safety-zone for innovating new ways to do something and start looking outside to innovate to remodel our house in new and disruptive ways, we shall ensure that high-level human language translation is brought to new audiences who appreciate the service. With such an approach to innovation, we will truly have broken new ground.

**Innovation driven within the community**

It is thanks to the wonderful work being carried out by our universities that we now have students who will graduate with excellent language and technical skills, but also in preparing new entrants to the language industry with an appreciation of the need to adapt multi-disciplinary knowledge to the needs of the real world. For example, MIT’s Community Problem Solving Project is tasked to help us identify ways in which we can alter strategies and programs with tools and techniques that can be used in all manner of locations and to many varying ends. It may not be immediately obvious but someone has to think through health and safety issues that affect vastly diverse communities. Also the fact that
communities can involve grassroots on up to organization level and to government level, other benefits range from standardization to enabling development that otherwise might fail or simply not reach implementation due to costs, red tape and so on. Innovation in communities helps ensure their health. I do not believe it is being disruptive to keep reminding ourselves of the need to change and to find new ways and means to advance the language industry in keeping abreast of the times. We must not rest on our laurels. Even worse, we simply cannot keep working with the same set of practices simply because we’re comfortable with them. The distortion we see in the language industry supply chain, which often leaves translators as dogs’ bodies, needs remodeling. But how to achieve this without drastic measures that might be threatening to business decision-makers? I believe the best way forward is innovation in working practices that will balance roles more equitably. I don’t think our clients would complain. After all, they now want a greater say in how language quality is managed, how problems are dealt with effectively and how deliveries happen efficiently and with certainty. Hierarchical business models now find competition from holacracies, in which structures are leveled out and professionals receive credit for the contributions they are actually seen to make (e.g. Zappos.com). Anonymity is the enemy of attributing credit where it’s due. Co-operative ventures have worked in other industries (e.g. the GNU\Linux community). I wonder how well that might work for us? Team-building with self-governing multilingual, multicultural goals in mind could help move us forward and extend our community into under-developed regions. Indeed, the Agile methodology of project management suggests that there is potential for this here. Open lines of communication rather than compartmentalization must be positively beneficial. Or what about resolving the issues of attributing ownership to work? A pet peeve of translators for ever and a day! The innovations that technologies like blockchain promise could transform us into a powerhouse community that is second to none in the corporate universe (e.g. Ethereum.org).
So does innovation lead to evolution? Or does evolution lead to innovation? Surely when evolution stops moving forward, it's time to innovate. But if an evolved state is thriving, innovation is superfluous. Innovation and evolution for me enjoy a dynamic relationship and I believe this is a great thing for language providers. We must embrace change because if we do not, especially with technology often perceived more as a threat than a benefit, we just find ourselves caught in a volcanic eruption that like the unfortunate citizens of Pompeii buried them in a blanket of ash. Societies have constantly innovated in the languages they use and now we can add language-specific technological capabilities to the work that we do. Future historians will surely judge us for what we do now to embrace change, whether making the old new once again, or creating something revolutionary and new. Who knows? Maybe we will capture the attention of some ingenious AI that will ask us, “How did you translate that?”