

# Ring in the New

by Andrew Joscelyne

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Well, we've reached the end of another year of translation and localization. Traditionally, such moments are a time for taking stock, spotting trends, and making resolutions for the future. This is usually a high risk exercise—12 months is not always ideal for grasping what really matters in a business, a research program, a study curriculum, or a personal project. But a year's end has the virtue of being a milestone with attitude. So let's try and make a few generalizations about 1998—and beyond.

## Language Goes Online

The Web has continued to play a role as both business driver and new-delivery platform. The emergence of a universal digital knowledge base has brought varied benefits to everyone's lives. One could argue that the Web is the very embodiment of that rather slippery concept: Globalization. The big players in the industry all offer global solutions and are increasingly using the global network to tie their suppliers—often individual translators—as well as their clients to the process of simultaneous document localization in many languages.

But now that we are all on the Web, interacting like mad, the real effect on the translation business will be to bind the core act of language transfer ever more closely to the emerging patterns of business workflow that define specific industries. Another way of getting closer to one's customers.

While large swathes of translation activity (looking up terms, accessing background information, repetitive word tasks, shifting files around) are being simplified and accelerated, the need for near real-time delivery has emphasized how important organization and training are to translators who must integrate fully into the info cycle to survive.

As the software-localization people say: we've mastered the words, the problem now is how to tackle the complexity issue. In other words, the "language" issue has gone mainstream. As the decade comes to an end, some larger players on the scene are even rebranding themselves as global electronic information-service suppliers—going beyond the '80s concept of *localization* and the '90s buzzword of *product globalization* to enter the 21st century as *multilingual information managers*.

## Meet iTranslator

And thereby hangs one of the year's tales. Among the more fascinating career paths in recent years has been the rise and rise of the Belgian language-technology company Lernout & Hauspie, which began life in the then-arcane field of speech processing. This year it

emerged as the first integrator with enough cash to plug together the various parts of the multilingual information process into an automated, Web-based whole.

Their recent roll-out of iTranslator, a Web-based translation server for corporate intranets to use as an automatic multilingual document-gisting service, looks like the culmination of this ongoing process of "linguaging" the information business. The idea itself of a translation server is hardly original—Systran was offered online to the public on the French Minitel network about 10 years ago, and a similar type of service has been available in Japan for as long.

The novelty of iTranslator is that it opens up multilingual processing in an expanding range of languages to everyone in the organization, just as the AltaVista search-and-translate service offers a limited equivalent to every Web surfer. Many of us will now be interested in what the translation post-editing service that comes in the service package will be like.

Will users accept gisted documents? Will there be much call for cleaned-up translations? If so, how much, and how will the process be managed effectively as a bulk delivery? Will it spur new research into post-editing tools? Will post-editing offer a business opportunity to language-service suppliers?

The L&H adventure was basically technology-driven: multilinguality was new and exciting when they began, and posed a real challenge to our dully digital machines. There is every likelihood, though, that the larger language companies in our industry will compete to offer similar services, starting not from the technology but from their skills at organizing global information platforms.

## Charting the Course

We have already seen one or two players acquire the odd language technology/tool supplier. Watch out for further M&A activity on this front as the major actors in the translation industry learn to differentiate themselves by building more automated services into their product mix. Not simply to make their own processes more productive, but to cash in on the great Web bonanza. Engineers, watch out!

Which is why we include a Christmas technology wish-list in this end-of-year issue. It's always fun to hear someone throw caution to the wind for a while and speculate wildly about the tools of their trade, be they individuals, corporates, or techno-buffs.

A Happy New Year to you all!



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The language industries start to go mainstream with the Web—the very embodiment of "globalization."