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Tools and Toys for 'Terps: A Quick Stroll through the App Store

Tools for translators have long taken center stage in the translation market as the Holy Grails of productivity, accuracy, and quality. What is available to interpreters?

A brief review of the literature on interpreting and technology points us to a series of excellent articles published on the website of the International Association of Conference Interpreters ("Interpreters versus Technology: Reflections on a Difficult Relationship: Parts 1 and 2").[1] The author, Alexander Drechsel, is correct in pointing out that the interpreting industry has had an uneasy relationship with technology. Despite that, we are on the verge of many technological developments that we hope will bring more innovation to interpreting.

Having worked both as a translator and as a conference interpreter, I have watched the boom of translation tool development over the past 10 years. While I have had plenty of opportunities to preview several tools available to translators, I keep hoping for more technology designed for interpreters. My encounters with such technology have been erratic, and sometimes the result of chance discoveries from other fields (e.g., ear, nose, and throat care, speech therapy, and language learning).

I'd like to share my experiences with five apps from the Apple App Store that I feel would be particularly useful to practicing and experienced interpreters.

VOICE-O-METER
http://bit.ly/voice-o-meter

Voice-O-Meter is an app for anyone who speaks too softly, too loudly, or who has difficulty modulating the volume of their speech. The key here is to practice "just right" volume. This is a tool that comes straight from speech therapy and is handy for interpreters who want to measure the range of their voice.

To give you an idea of what decibel levels are safe and sustainable to our precious ears, whispering ranks about 30dB, whereas normal conversation is about 60dB. Anything over 90dB is a level at which lengthy exposure could result in hearing loss. Both in interpreter training and in the real world, it is important to be mindful not only of the sounds we pick up from the environment, but also the sounds we produce. The latter not only have the potential to damage our hearing, but also our throat.

Voice-O-Meter allows users to measure between 60dB and 80dB, and it sends a warning chime if the voice pitch is outside of this range. It also gives visual feedback, making it easy to practice at home. Press "start" and the Voice-O-Meter will immediately begin measuring the volume of your voice. Practice keeping the volume of your voice "just right" so that the blue arrow stays within the green space on the meter. You can also adjust the range of decibels included in the target range to account for background noise.

While the app is promising, the fact that some users have problems adjusting the decibel levels is problematic.

VBOOKZ PDF VOICE READER
http://bit.ly/vbookz-reader

This app reads your PDF files aloud, turning any PDF into an "audio book," and works on iPads, iPhones, or iPods. An interactive cursor allows users to follow along, pause reading, or even repeat lines to ensure reading comprehension. The app can read PDFs in 16 languages (users can select either a male or female voice). An in-app method allows you to purchase English (U.S.), English (U.K.), French, German, Finnish, Dutch (Netherlands), European and Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Polish, Danish, Norwegian, Czech, and Russian. vBookz Voice Reader also adds orientation and navigation tools that enhance the reading experience.

This app requires users to either import PDFs from Dropbox or Google Drive into a library, turning any PDF into an "audio book." Once documents are in a library, users can select from their own imported documents. The app allows you to adjust the reading speed (from 100 to 500 words per minute). The concatenation and flow of reading are better in English than in the foreign languages I tested (Portuguese, Spanish, and French).

One creative use for this app, given its excellent rhythm and concatenation in the natural reading flow in English, is

to play with the reading speed and have interpreters work at a given rate. Naturally, this approach has limitations, since speeches that are read are traditionally more difficult to interpret. For example, according to the National Center for the State Courts, an interpreter who is preparing for the federal exam needs to perform a simultaneous interpretation rendition of a monologue speech at 120 words per minute, whereas the bilateral simultaneous interpretation of witness testimony is generally rendered at 150–160 words per minute.[2]

Another creative way to use vBookz Voice Reader is to use it as an "audio book" when you have a lot of reference material to cram before an interpreting assignment. *Forbes* magazine says that the average adult reads at 300 words per minute, whereas the average college professor can read about 675 words per minute.[3] Because the app allows users to adjust the reading speed from 100 up to 500 words per minute, it can also be used as a way to acquire information, much like a podcast, allowing users to access content hands-free and on the go.

BE ON AIR
http://bit.ly/be-on-air
This app is designed to broadcast a stream over local Wi-Fi networks in real time like a radio. Be On Air makes it easy to conduct lectures, master classes, or conferences and seminars without the need for special audio equipment. The app has listen/speak/voice recorder and interpreter mode features, which makes it a good solution for interpreting in the field, lecturers, teachers, tour guides, or anyone who needs to be heard by a large audience. Here are some key features:

- The audience can ask the speaker questions via a built-in messaging service.

- Both the speaker and the audience can record the broadcast.

- The speaker can turn off the audience's recording capability at any time and protect it with a password.

- Simultaneous interpreters can create their own streams while listening to the main speaker broadcast.

- Users can upload previously recorded audio broadcasts to Dropbox.

Big disclaimer: I'm also a fan of standard, ISO-compliant booths and "boothable" conditions for interpreters to allow them to do the best job possible. However, the fact that this app can transform iPhones into receivers and transmitters had me intrigued. I especially like the fact that the audience can tap into a live audio stream and/or ask the speaker questions via a built-in messaging service. (The audience should also install the app on their devices in order to connect to the live audio stream.)

I tested the app by creating a stream on my iPad and broadcasting it to my iPhone. After conducting this test, one improvement I would suggest would be to allow users to the change the volume. An obvious challenge is having to depend on bandwidth fluctuations to broadcast a steady quality feed.

INTERPLEX LITE
http://bit.ly/interplex-lite
This app allows users to view Interplex glossary databases on an iPhone or iPod Touch. The app has a sample database that comes with Interplex. You can use iTunes and Dropbox to drop Interplex databases (*.iplx2) onto a device for mobile viewing. This enables simple searches or multi-glossary searches.

Interplex Lite has an easy-to-use and fast search feature, allowing multilingual and wildcard searches. Given how dynamic things can be during any given interpreting assignment and how sometimes interpreters have to learn terminology on the fly, one improvement I would suggest for this feature would be the ability to make changes directly in the iPhone/iPad interface, without having to resort to Dropbox synchronization.

I appreciate that the developer thought about how important terminology management is for interpreters, especially the cross-platform flexibility. The app works on Windows, Macs, iPhones, iPod Touches, and iPads, allowing terminology management to start on a laptop or desktop and then migrate to a mobile device.

LISTENING DRILL
http://bit.ly/listening-drill
Listening Drill is a foreign language practice drill that allows users to import

TED Talks, audio books, MP3 files, and other file formats so that they can be viewed and played through the app. Listening Drill allows users to play videos with subtitles in different languages, as long as they are already available for that particular video. The app is available in a "lite" (free) and paid version.

From a PC or iTunes, you can download and synch TED Talks and also control playing speeds (05x ~ 2.0x). The paid version allows term extraction that shows promise if it can be integrated with other tools. The paid version also allows users to synch TED Talks that have bilingual subtitles that can be viewed simultaneously with the video.

A PROMISING START
Although most of these apps were not developed specifically for interpreters, they show promise for interpreters and interpreter trainers alike. As interpreters start becoming more visible in the world, I have faith that software developers will respond to our technological needs and wants. I also have faith that interpreters can develop an amicable relationship with technology by giving these types of tools a spin. ◐

NOTES
[1] Drechsel, Alexander. "Interpreters versus Technology: Reflections on a Difficult Relationship: Parts 1 and 2" (International Association of Conference Interpreters), http://bit.ly/interpreters-technology.

[2] Federal Court Interpreter Certification Exam (National Center for State Courts), http://bit.ly/oral-exam.

[3] Nelson, Brett. "Do You Read Fast Enough to be Successful?" *Forbes* (June 4, 2012), http://bit.ly/Forbes-reading.

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