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Thoughts from JIAMCATT 2023: Is it all about tech?

JIAMCATT, the International Annual Meeting on Computer-Assisted Translation and Terminology is an IAMLADP (International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications) task force and provides its participants with a forum for debate, exchange of expertise and cooperation in the fields of computer-assisted terminology and translation, interpretation, and documentation retrieval. JIAMCATT's membership includes most international organizations as well as various national institutions and academic bodies actively involved in the field of terminology and translation. The 2023 conference was held on the ITO campus in Turin, a sprawling landscaped campus near the Po River, from May 3 to May 5 and I attended the conference as an observer, representing FIT.

The theme for this year was "Working Smarter: Innovative Tech for Efficient Language Services". Outside the conference rooms, some Language Tech companies ran stands from which they interacted with potential customers. With around 100 people in the room and 90 people online, the conference was very dynamic and varied, featuring two keynote speakers (Stella Hodkin from Clear Global, better known as Translators without Borders, and Jane Nicholson from the WHO), 12 presentations, live demos on new tools, two workshops, and a panel discussion. Each presentation was followed by a hybrid Q&A session using SLIDO, a platform also used to conduct surveys on the participants' thoughts and expectations (motivation, inclusiveness, knowledge transfer, insight). Specialized workshops were followed by reports during a plenary session, ensuring that everyone could benefit from the outcomes.

While acknowledging the potential dangers associated with AI, the focus of the conference was primarily on the positive change it can bring to language services. Language technologies encompass a range of applications, including AI applied to language services (NMT, post-editing, speech recognition, quality prediction, summarization, simplification, term extraction) and work assignment through a TMS that allocates the different stages of a workflow and generates statistics. Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT and others are speeding up change in various domains. Additionally, emphasis was placed on the necessary change management among staff members, such as translators, interpreters, terminologists, documentalists, project managers, and IT people. "This is not all about tech" was an oft-repeated mantra.

While the presentations showcased the positive advancements and implemented workflows in the linguistic and documentation services of the largest organizations, specialized workshops allowed for more in-depth discussions and raised questions, especially regarding how stakeholders in translation/interpretation/documentation projects could improve communication and be more specific about their needs and expectations, some of which may not align with feasibility standards.

It is worth noted that there is considerable variation among organizations, with uneven distribution of language technology resources. Large organizations have custom-built tools and enough manpower to implement and enhance them, while others face short-term challenges and a dearth of human specialists, resulting in a fragmented collection of tools lacking cohesion.

After three days of intensive learning and collaboration, JIAMCATT 2023 successfully addressed a significant portion of the participants' needs. As confirmed by feedback, participants expressed a desire for more hands-on workshops in the future, held more frequently than once a year, as well as specialized networking sessions. JIAMCATT 2024 will be held in Paris.

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