

South African language innovators bridge digital divide

Translate.org.za, a cyber project meant to take computing to South African languages, has won the prestigious African ICT Achiever 2006 Award for bridging the digital divide in the continent by breaking down the language barrier.

'Finally, after years of hard work promoting the importance of mother tongue languages in ICTs, it is fitting that language has been recognised as a critical part of the digital divide in the same year the African Union celebrates the year of African languages,' said Translate.org.za founder Dwayne Bailey in a statement.

'We hope this will lead to more localisation within South Africa and across the continent as we look forward to help others to make similar achievements in their countries.'

South Africa has 11 official languages, which is second only to India. As a result, there are many official names for the country. It also recognises eight non-official languages.

Translate.org.za's work has included the translation of computer software into the 11 official languages using locally based translators, and more recently the creation of the first all-South African language keyboard - something which has been rated as the world's first.

'This is the first Africans-helping-Africans, no strings attached free software. It has always been my dream that one day fellow South Africans would be using computers in their mother tongues,' said Bailey.

The NGO says it 'intervenes whenever technology becomes a barrier to language'.

For example, Venda, one of the official languages of South Africa, cannot be accurately typed on a computer. The result is that Venda speakers are unable to type their own names correctly. One can only wonder how their names have been typed on their birth certificates.

Using Translate.org.za's keyboard means Venda can for the first time be typed accurately along with all the other official languages, including Afrikaans, and to a lesser extent Northern Sotho and Tswana.

Translate has also made spell checkers from Afrikaans all the way to Zulu. This means people in South Africa no longer have to suffer the indignity of their language 'being underlined in red by an ignorant teacher'.

Said Abe Mathibela, business development manager at Translate.org.za and a Sesotho speaker: 'This recognition makes me very, very happy. It's a breakthrough, as now the common myths and fallacies that we cannot have computers in our languages have been bridged. There are a whole lot of things that can now happen across Africa to challenge the exclusion of African languages.'

On the African continent as well as worldwide, Translate.org.za has provided help and support to other passionate people wanting to start similar initiatives for their mother tongue.

Now through the WordForge Foundation, of which Translate.org.za is a founding partner, they say

they will continue to help others in Africa and the rest of the world.

Supporters of Translate.org.za include Obsidian Systems, The Shuttleworth Foundation, St James Software, Hewlett-Packard South Africa, the Department of Communication and the CSIR (the South African government arm promoting and funding scientific and industrial research).

In January 2005, Bailey had visited India to share notes with those working on localisation of computing in Indian and other Asian languages.

He had then said in an interview: 'When we started, we made lots of mistakes. Nobody else who interacts with us makes the same mistakes. Since we are dealing with 11 languages, the situation in India (with its multiplicity of languages) is the closest thing to the work we have to do.'

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