A fond goodbye to the king of CAT

Michael Benis pays homage to the original author of Deja Vu, Emilio Benito.

It was with great shock and sadness that the translation community learned of the death of Emilio Benito on Sunday, February 8, 2004 at the age of 56 from complications arising from cancer and its treatment. Emilio earned himself a great many friends in the industry due to the innovative strengths of the Deja Vu translation memory software system he created, his constant willingness to listen to and act on feedback and his indefatigable support for any users experiencing problems, sometimes nothing to do with the software itself, at any time of the day or night, seven days a week. Indeed, much of the shock at the news of his death was due to the fact that despite his semi-official retirement he had continued to be so actively involved until the very end, and practically no one was aware that he had been struggling with this cruel disease until his death was announced.

The original Deja Vu almost started out as a hobby of Emilio's, but quickly drew attention for its ease-of-use and, with the release of version 2, its increasingly comprehensive list of powerful features. Emilio's was a highly creative mind, evinced both in the delightful name he chose for his software and his ceaseless quest for further innovations. But he was also a very modest man who would readily listen to both criticism and suggestions. In a world awash with blame and excuses, Emilio always went straight to the point, was always interested in offering the best possible product and moving on if need be. He would patiently explain a function that had been misunderstood, but never defend one that could be improved, and had no hesitation in jettisoning Deja Vu's original Word interface, for example, when it became clear that he could get the system to do so much more without it.

I myself only actually met Emilio once, out in Italy, during a very well-lubricated dinner that involved me in an awful lot of impromptu interpreting. We only exchanged a few words right at the end of the meal, when getting our coats. I don't think he'd particularly enjoyed himself (it was a rather exuberant, vacuous business occasion) and he didn't for a second think of disguising that in his countenance, which shone out in radiant, impatient indifference amongst the sea of Cheshire cats surrounding us. I loved that at the time and remember it now as a mark of his utter candour, not to imply that he was in the least bit glum. Indeed, he had a gentle sense of humour that would often pervade our subsequent e-mail exchanges.

As Atril grew, Emilio surrounded himself with a dedicated team, including his son Daniel, whom he provided with unreserved support during the latter's development of Deja Vu X, the most recent version of the system. It has always been impressive when talking with members of the Atril team to see the respect and affection they share for him, very much a mentor rather than a boss, regarded affectionately for his "eccentricities" such as a bearish disdain for hypocrisy and hype. As a result, he leaves them firmly in control of a blossoming company, following a seamless transition that leaves each of them with a valued individual role. He will be sorely missed, especially by the many Deja Vu users that he helped so much without ever meeting. He leaves us all a legacy and an example that it is our privilege to treasure.