

February 2008
Volume XXXVII
Number 2
A Publication
of the
American
Translators
Association

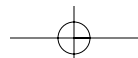
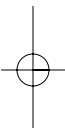
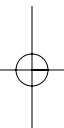
The *ata* CHRONICLE

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The Perfect Keyboard

By Naomi J. Sutcliffe de Moraes

Translators work with at least two languages, and this often entails using two different sets of characters and sometimes even two different keyboard layouts. This article describes how you can modify your keyboard layout or create your own, with the possible side benefit of reduced pain in your wrists (due to keyboard-related repetitive strain injuries).

Before I explain how to create the perfect keyboard layout for you and your languages, let me define the term *keyboard layout*. Every computer has a physical keyboard, and the keyboard layout is a file hidden on your PC that defines what happens when you type on your physical keyboard. The physical keyboard normally matches the default keyboard layout when the computer, operating system, and keyboard are purchased as a package. However, this does not need to be the case. You can use any keyboard layout with your physical keyboard if your physical keyboard has the correct number of keys. If it has fewer keys, some characters will be missing.

To switch between two different keyboard layouts for the same physical keyboard, use the keyboard icon on the Windows status bar in MS Windows (see Figure 1), or use a shortcut key combination defined in the Control Panel settings. If you do not yet know how to configure and switch between

keyboard layouts in MS Windows, please refer to Jost Zetsche's article on this topic in the April 2006 issue of *The ATA Chronicle*.

You may want to switch back and forth between two keyboard layouts for different languages. You can also create your own keyboard layout and switch between it and the standard layout so your computer is accessible to others who might need to use it. This article assumes that you are familiar with how to configure and switch between keyboard layouts in MS Windows, and takes you one or

Figure 1: Keyboard icon on status bar for switching between keyboard layouts

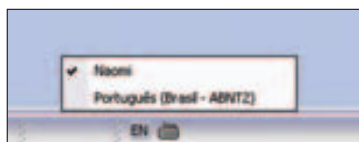


Figure 2: German Keyboard



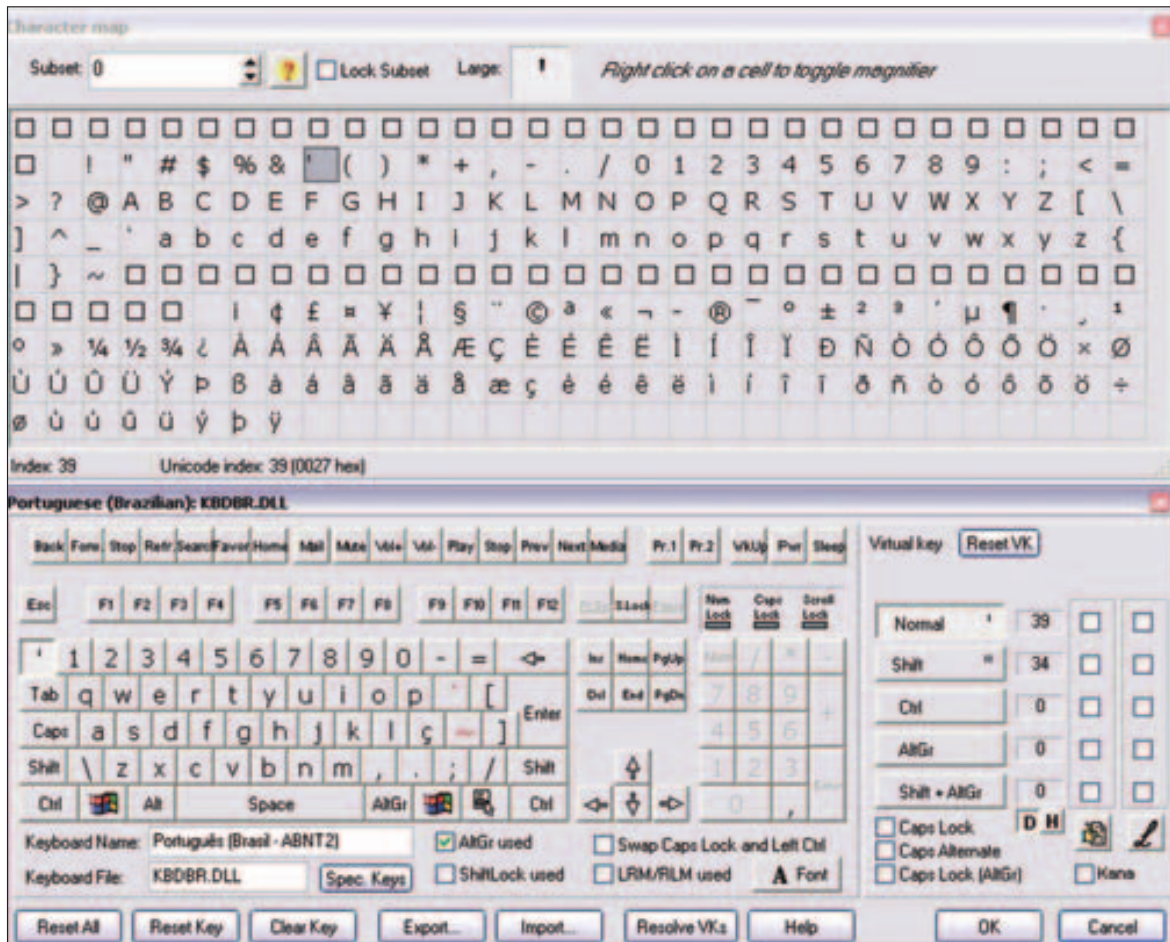
two steps beyond. Again, please refer to Jost's article if you need a refresher course on this subject.

Modifying an Existing Keyboard Layout

For some pairs of languages, translators can get by with just one keyboard layout, which is the case for Portuguese/English. The ABNT2 Brazilian keyboard layout has everything one might need to type in both English and Portuguese!

A more difficult situation is the German/English pair. Even translators translating into English must search the Internet and interact with their clients and colleagues in German. The U.S.-International keyboard mentioned by Jost in the article cited above is an option. Another option is to switch back and forth between the German and English keyboard layouts. The German keyboard is shown in Figure 2. As you can see, it has what

Figure 3: MS Keyboard Layout Manager



is called a QWERTZ layout rather than the QWERTY layout that is used in the U.S. These names come from the characters on the line above the home (center) row for the left hand.

Remembering where the extra keys are on the German keyboard may not be that difficult, but if you were raised typing on the U.S. layout you may find the switch of the Z and Y keys confusing. This is especially true if you must use the QWERTY layout some-

times and the QWERTZ layout at other times. One possible solution to this problem is to modify the German layout, putting the Z and Y keys back into their U.S. keyboard locations while keeping the accented vowels and other special keys in their original positions. The French layout also differs from the U.S. layout in the positions of several letters. It could also be modified as described above for the German layout.

These changes can be made using Keyboard Layout Manager (KLM), a shareware program developed in Serbia by Milan Vidaković and Igor Milijašević. The two principal windows are shown in Figure 3 with the standard Brazilian Portuguese layout in the editing window. The program is very easy to use and extensive help is available online. Another option—which I have not tried—is the MS Keyboard Layout Creator. ➤

The Perfect Keyboard Continued

Figure 4: Diacritical Editor



Information on both programs is provided in the references at the end of this article.

Dead Keys

Dead keys are accent keys that put an accent on the character typed

immediately afterward. In the days of manual typewriters, dead keys typed the accent on the paper, but did not cause the carriage to move to the left, thus allowing the character to be accented to be typed in the same location on the paper. In KLM, dead keys are shown in red and are edited in a separate window. Dead keys on your PC can be used to type almost any character. Figure 4 shows what I have done with my double quote key. If I type " followed by a space, I get ". If I type " followed by o, I get ö (a Hungarian letter). If I type " followed by a, I get å (a Norwegian letter). Since the computer does not work like a typewriter, I do not need to use a dead key for a single type of accent as on a typewriter. Indeed, in KLM, I can assign any character to the dead key, and this character will appear when the dead key is followed by a space.

The Dvorak Keyboard Layout

As described above, if all your languages use the same basic alphabet you can create a combined layout that allows you to type everything with one keyboard layout. However, you will probably be using some variation on the very inefficient QWERTY layout, which is unnecessarily tiring. The QWERTY layout was created to slow typists down! Back in the olden days (when I learned to type!), typewriters were made of long "fingers" with the letters on the tip. If the typist typed too fast, the fingers got tangled and the typist had to stop to untangle them. Unfortunately, the QWERTY layout is still the standard, not only for English, but for many different languages. Portuguese does not even have a K in its alphabet, but K is on the home row (the row beginning ASDF on the QWERTY keyboard) of the Portuguese and Brazilian keyboards. (For more information on the evolu-

Figure 5: Dvorak Keyboard for English

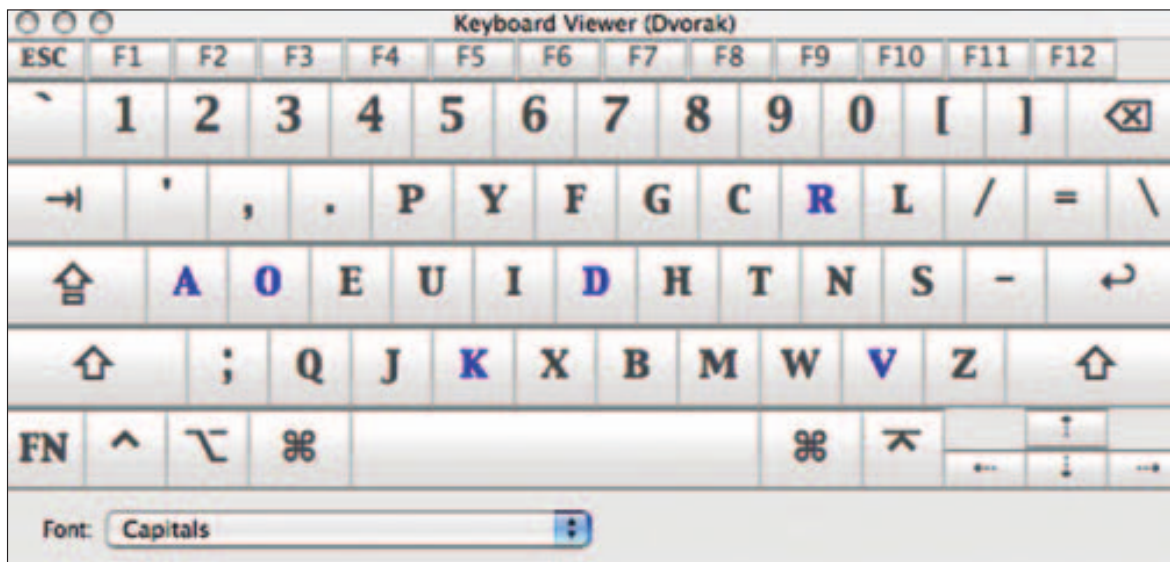
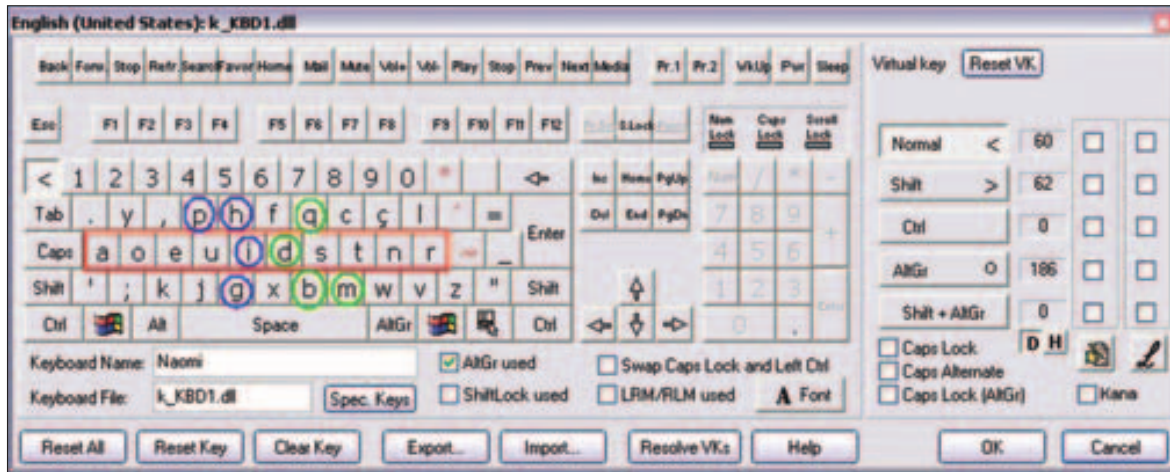


Figure 6: My Customized Layout

tion and problems related to the QWERTY keyboard, see the articles “The Curse of QWERTY,” published in *Discover Magazine*, or “Make Mine Dvorak,” published in *Slate*. See the references at the end of this article.)

An alternative standard layout is the English Dvorak layout shown in Figure 5 on page 18. It is one of the standard MS Windows layout options, so you

keys you need for your other languages. Dvorak-style layouts are available for some other languages (though not built into the operating system) at the Dvorak Zine site listed in the references. The principles behind the Dvorak layout and Dvorak-style layouts are:

- The most-used letters should be on the home row.

Common key combinations like WH, QU, and TH should also be on opposite hands (*w* on one hand and *H* on the other).

- The row above the home row is the second easiest and the row below it is the hardest, so put rare letters on the lowest row.
- The strongest fingers are the index and middle fingers, with the ring and pinky fingers being the weakest.

If your languages all use the same basic alphabet you can create a combined keyboard that allows you to type everything on one keyboard layout.

just need to select it in the appropriate control panel. All PCs running any Windows OS, the Macintosh OS, and most flavors of Linux have a built-in English Dvorak layout. You could also start with the Dvorak layout for one of your languages as a base and modify it slightly to include the accents or special

- A typist can type faster when alternating letters are on different hands. Thus, the Dvorak layout puts the vowels on the left side of the home row and the most common consonants on the right side of the home row, increasing the frequency of alternating hands with each letter.

Many people are reluctant to change keyboard layouts because they believe it will take too long to learn the new layout. I learned my new keyboard layout (described in the next section) in a day. I was able to type at my normal speed within two weeks, and I have been typing much faster and with no wrist pain for seven years. Needless to say, the transition is easier if done during a vacation. To learn the new layout, print out a copy and tape it above your keyboard or on the bottom edge of your monitor. Create sentences using words you can type using only the letters on the home row. (Remember how hard this ➡

The Perfect Keyboard Continued

was with the QWERTY keyboard in typing class? There is not much you can do with just one vowel and eight consonants.) Practice these words, then add more words using first the letters typed by the index finger, and then the letters typed by the middle finger, etc. You will be up to speed in no time. The rarely used keys, like \, will be the hardest to remember during the first month. I think it is easier to learn a completely different layout that to learn a layout with just a few differences.

Creating a New Keyboard Layout from Scratch for Your Specific Needs

I type 50% in English, 45% in Portuguese, and 5% in other languages, most of which need accented vowels. Once I started experiencing

The home row is marked in red. After using this layout for seven years, there are a few things I wish I had done differently, especially the position of the letter V. Since my husband's name is Vítor, I use the letter V more frequently. I get around this by addressing e-mails to him as "Querido": all but the Q are on the home row!

Deciding what to put where was not too difficult. To create a similar layout for your languages, do the following:

1. Find text written in the languages in question, either something you wrote or off the Internet. Remove any proper names, since if the text is on Zimbabwe and this word is repeated many times you will have an inaccurate count of how many times Z and W appear in the language.
2. After removing proper names, cut the text down so you have the same amount of words in each language if you write 50% of the time in each: a few thousand at least. Put the text into MS Word.
3. Going letter by letter through the alphabet and punctuation, replace each character with the @ symbol using Replace All. MS Word will tell you *how many* replacements it has made. Note this down in a chart and you will have the average letter frequency for the two languages.
4. Write down common letter pairs in the two languages, such as WH and TH in English, QU and ST in Portuguese.
5. Put the vowels on the left side, with the most common vowels under the index finger (U and I on my keyboard). Put the most common consonants on the right home row. Put the dead keys on the right to alternate with the vowels. I would probably not put the dead keys under the pinky finger if I were to redo my keyboard, but I probably made this decision based on the fact that I do not need them to type in English. I might put them closer to the index finger in the top row, and put some consonants on the pinky finger.
6. Work out the positions of other consonants based on letter pairs. The easiest keys to reach with the index fingers on my keyboard are marked in blue and green in Figure 6 on page 19. I should probably have put W on the upper row for WH, switching with Ç. H is very common in English, but relatively rare in Portuguese, which does not have WH, TH, nor PH. Having H on the left worked out well for combinations with WH and TH. PH was not such a good choice, since it uses the same finger for both letters. Do not forget to consider your name, the names of your family members, and the names of the countries you must type most often (like the Z in Brazil, which I forgot when designing my layout).
7. Remove things you do not use often and put them on the Alt Gr or Alt level (meaning you would need to hold down the Alt Gr or Alt key before pressing the character key).

Many people are reluctant to change keyboard layouts because they believe it will take too long to learn the new layout.

pain in my wrists after becoming a translator (I used to be a physicist and systems engineer), I searched in vain for a Portuguese Dvorak layout or some other Dvorak layout with the accents I needed so I could type in both English and Portuguese without switching layouts. After discovering the KLM program, I decided to create my own Dvorak layout optimized for both Portuguese and English (in other words, a compromise between what would be optimized for one or the other). The result is shown in Figure 6 on page 19.

This is great for £, {,}, and §. What you need depends on what you type. I love the underscore “_” for naming files and computer programming, so I put it on my home row at the far left, without the shift.

As you can see, since I tried to treat Portuguese and English equally, my

1. Use two different keyboard layouts and switch between them (using the status bar or a shortcut key combination). These could be standard layouts or customized layouts, as described above.

2. Create a dual keyboard layout that uses the Shift key to switch from

What you need depends on what you type.

keyboard favors English in the placement of some keys and Portuguese in the placement of others, like Q. You will want to analyze closely how much you type in each language before creating a “middle-of-the-road” solution, and adjust the percentage of text in each language before calculating frequency statistics.

The location of punctuation on my keyboard is similar to that of the Dvorak keyboard, and is great for typing numbers on the number pad (I prefer the “.” on the number pad, while the Portuguese standard keyboard puts a “;” there). When I need to type in a long list of numbers including commas and periods, I use the numerical keypad on the right for numbers and the decimal point, and my left hand hovers over the comma on the left. On those few occasions when I type numbers on the top line, at least my hand does not need to jump three rows (!) every time I want a comma or period, like with the QWERTY keyboard.

Creating a New Keyboard Layout for Two Languages with Different Alphabets or Writing Systems

What do you do if you need to type in a language with a different alphabet? You have several options:

one to the other. This would need to be created based on the keyboard for one of the languages, either customized or standard.

3. Use a phonetic keyboard layout that mimics your normal keyboard layout, but which results in characters in the other language.

Two-alphabet Keyboard Layout Using Shift-lock

When I began studying modern Greek, I became frustrated at how hard it was to type vocabulary lists. I had to switch to the Greek keyboard and back every other word! I had already created a Dvorak-style Greek keyboard layout (of course!), so I then created a third dual keyboard that contained only lowercase letters. The Shift key does not necessarily need to provide the uppercase letter corresponding to the lowercase letter on the same key. I used my customized layout as the base layout and then recreated my Greek layout for the shift layer (the different layers are shown on the right in Figure 6 on page 19). This is great for typing terminology, and is not too bad for typing in MS Word with the autocorrect turned on.

MS Word can automatically capitalize the first letter of a sentence or of proper names.

Phonetic Keyboard Layouts

I have not needed to type in any other foreign alphabets/scripts, but a colleague suggested using a phonetic keyboard layout for Russian. The basic idea is that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the letters for the two languages (with extra keys for extra letters, when necessary), and you type using a layout that mimics your English layout, but which outputs characters in the other language on your screen. See the references at the end of this article for an explanation of one possible phonetic Russian keyboard provided by Paul Gorodyansky.

Pros and Cons

If you are used to switching back and forth between two keyboard layouts, you should be able to type using both your new personalized keyboard and the standard QWERTY. My husband does this. The advantage of creating a new keyboard layout (rather than using macros in MS Word) is that it is valid for all programs running on your operating system, not just specific programs, and can be installed on multiple computers quickly. I have been using my keyboard layout, with small updates, since 2000. During this time, I have twice visited friends for extended periods of time. I spent 10 minutes setting up my layout on their computers so I could use it while I was visiting. I did not set it as the default layout, so they did not even know it was there, and then I erased it before leaving.

I recently had to translate a hospital bill including all the internal codes for the different items used, such as cotton balls. I was amazed at how many ➡

The Perfect Keyboard Continued

of the codes had letters like K, J, Y, and F. It was almost painful typing these codes, which are off the home row on my keyboard. I realized that they were probably chosen because they are easy to type on a QWERTY keyboard. Typing them on my Dvorak-style keyboard reminded me what it was like to type *regular* words on a QWERTY keyboard.

If you have little control over your computer at work or must use public computers often, a personalized keyboard is probably not the right choice unless you feel comfortable switching back and forth. If you are used to switching keyboards, this should not be a problem. Another option is to try the English Dvorak keyboard if you type principally in English, since it is available on all PCs. I no longer touch type on the QWERTY keyboard, and must hunt and peck when my personalized keyboard is not available. Despite this, I have never regretted switching, especially since the pain in my wrists has not returned. Not having your layout while you are on vacation (assuming you do not have a laptop or do not take it on vacation) could actually be considered a bonus—you will actually relax!

ata

References and More Information

Keyboard Layout Manager (KLM)

www.klm32.com

Lite edition (free): Does not allow editing of dead keys or ligatures.

Pro edition (\$22): Allows dead key and ligature editing, in addition to editing of certain other keys on the keyboard, including “.” on the numeric keypad. Two other versions are also available, so see the website for details. The program is compatible with Windows Vista.

Microsoft Keyboard Layout Creator

www.microsoft.com/globaldev/tools/msklc.msp

This program appears to do the same thing as KLM, but it is free and appears to be much more difficult to use. I have not tried it.

Wikipedia Keyboard Layout Information

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keyboard_layout

This and other sites provide some history on keyboard layouts for different languages.

English and International Dvorak Keyboard Layouts

<http://dvzine.org/info/international.html>

Note that left-hand-only and right-hand-only layouts are also available for typists with physical limitations.

The Curse of QWERTY

<http://discovermagazine.com/1997/apr/thecurseofqwerty1099>

Article in *Discover Magazine* by Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

Make Mine Dvorak

www.slate.com/?id=2061547

Article in *Slate* by Nicholas Thompson.

Paul Gorodyansky's Phonetic Keyboard for Russian

http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/PaulGor/kbd_e.htm#p1251

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