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Localisation & Translation

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Localisation & Translation

What's the Difference?

By Janet Basdell

Plain Words' Founder and Director

When British and American software companies first began marketing their products in foreign countries, they tried to do it using British and American translators. But they soon discovered that doing a straight language translation wasn't enough (the date 04/12/2002, for instance, would be interpreted as the 12th of April by an American, while a European would see it as the 4th of December).

They found that to be successful you need local intelligence and a thorough understanding of the customs and cultures of the country you're planning to market in.

This is because words and phrases that work well in the U.S. or U.K. might evoke laughter or worse in Germany or China, if translated literally. Getting it wrong in this respect can cost time and money, not to mention losing face – the latter being potentially fatal.

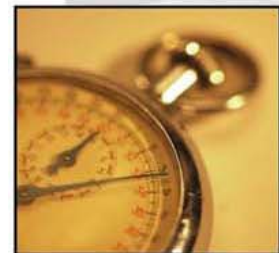
Mother Tongue

This is why companies now use localisation specialists, rather than straight translation services. The best localisation specialists use translators who translate *only* into their mother tongue. This means the translations are both accurate and natural; and the true sense of the information is completely maintained in the new language. Plus it makes doubly sure there are no cultural gaffes. And gaffes are very easy to make – especially when you consider there are 15 different languages and 1,600 dialects in India, and that the Swiss and Belgians have three official languages each.

Big Business

Not surprisingly – given the difficulties of translating products into other languages – localisation has become big business. But this isn't the only reason. Businesses often feel a pressure to grow, which drives them overseas to new markets. And then there's the worldwide expansion of the computer industry – and in particular the growth of the Internet. As people around the world gain access to the Net, the need for multi-lingual documentation and websites has increased dramatically.

According to one research firm, the worldwide market for localisation services will reach \$17.2 billion by 2003. And analysts predict that by 2005 about three-quarters of the 1 billion people communicating and doing business online will be outside the U.S. and U.K., and most of them won't speak English...



Localising Software

Not all products require cultural tailoring. Operating systems like Windows generally just need translation (although it also includes a number of localisation settings, such as currency and date format). But for products like accounting software, extensive localisation is crucial. Clearly, financial and tax issues vary enormously from country to country. But the terminology used to describe money and its transactions is different too – and that’s leaving aside colloquialisms and slang.



Other Factors

But it isn’t just language you have to be careful about. Apart from the obvious technical differences – electrical voltages, etc – there are factors only a localisation specialist would be aware of.

If you were marketing an information CD or a game that included images of road signs, for instance, they would need to be in their local typefaces and design style.

Even speech bubbles can cause problems. You need to make sure you leave plenty of space in them, as the same phrases in different languages can be considerably longer. The German for “tram stop”, for example, is “strassenbahnhaltestelle”.



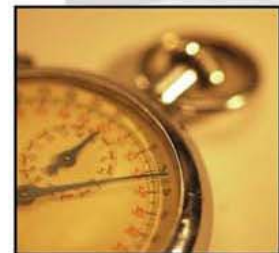
Vital

Ideally, a company should contact a localisation specialist right at the start of a product’s life. Marketing issues, such as the target audience and their cultural outlook, can then be assessed and brought into the planning and development stages.

Yes, extensive localisation increases cost.

But for companies looking to communicate their corporate messages to the global markets and achieve competitive edge, effective localisation is *vital*.

Localising their products will enable them to enter new business and consumer markets - and thus increase return on investment.



Final Notes

Enter the TranslatorBots...

Computer Assisted Translation

Software tools are available to speed up the work of translators. Trados (www.trados.com) is a market leader in this sector, known as *Translation Memory Software (TMS)*. TMS lightens the work-load of translators by comparing what needs to be translated to what has been translated. At lightning speeds, computers sift through already translated words and phrases for matches, or near matches. It still falls to the human being doing the work to smooth out the rough edges of computer-assisted translation – but the time savings are impressive.

Machine-Language Translation

Machine-Language-Translation is a process that uses computer software to translate text from one language to another. It is currently in great demand due to the big growth in international websites. It allows surfers to get fast translations of sites they visit, which are written in languages they are not familiar with.

One of the leaders in automatic, machine translation is Systran, based in Soisy-sous-Montmorency, France (www.systransoft.com). The company makes software that can translate more than 20 language pairs and provides the technology behind the free translation services offered by AltaVista's BabelFish, Google, Lycos, and AOL, as well as a wireless portal run by Oracle.

The quality of these free translation services tends to be uneven because the subject matter is so diverse and the process relatively imprecise. (It's called "gisting", because it yields translations that provide the "gist" of a document). But Systran – along with IBM and Belgium's Mendez - also offer advanced translation software to multinational companies, customised for the context of their websites.

If you have any comments about localisation, or international marketing, please email me at: feedback@plainwords.co.uk



Plain Words – The Big Picture

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- Project Managers
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- Instructional Designers
- Bid & Proposal Writers
- Web Content Developers
- Knowledge Managers

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- Designing & Writing Help Systems
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- Writing Effective Letters & Emails
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- Indexing On-line & Printed Material
- Estimating & Planning Technical Documents
- Writing for the Web



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