

Localization of Websites: Same Content, Same Effect?

A look at the localization of web pages:

To appeal to new customers, it is becoming more and more important to have a version of one's website in a foreign language. Sometimes translation can be a website's "weakest link." At this point, a lot of effort has been invested in the design, and a lot of time in choosing the one right word from among many.

Then suddenly it's time to get a quote for a translation, which has to be ready as quickly as possible.

The result is a faithful copy of the original that can never have the same effect that the original had.

The errors that are bound to turn up fall into the following categories:

- **Typos—probably too many:**

What is the incentive for a visitor to continue reading if every other word contains a typographical error? Here, we're not just talking about the kind of error that can inadvertently find its way into any document, but about things like incorrect or even missing accents, inflections, and misplaced letters.

This sort of error can cause the reader to pay more attention to the errors than to the content of the piece. After 10 typos in one paragraph, the reader is busy looking for the next mistake in order to prove how much better a job he could have done.

- **Special characters**

OK, now the text has been translated perfectly. Have you thought about how some characters could look on a screen in South Africa? A translator uses a text editor to produce output, and so does the proofreader. In both cases, the result looks perfect. Then the text appears on the web and is read by a potential customer in South Africa. Instead of umlauts, he sees some strange-looking characters. Accented characters need to be represented in HTML with special codes in order for them to appear correctly regardless of the browser's settings.

- **Half-translated pages**

This doesn't come from the onset of fatigue on the part of the translator (more about this later). No—it's a message from the author: "Thank you very much, and

now that you've found me, you can continue reading the text in my own language." Sometimes you'll find pages on the web where only the first paragraph is translated. Just as the reader's attention has been grabbed, and the piece is getting down to business, the translation stops, because the author was able to write the first few lines himself, but then what? Another disappointing example is set by pages that are thoroughly translated (including links and graphics), but as soon the reader clicks on a link, he goes back to the original language. In cases like this, it is better to translate nothing than to show the visitor only the product description in his language, with the hope that this will be enough to make him press the "BUY" button.

- **The onset of translator fatigue**

Translators are people, too. If the order comes in at 10 p.m. and has to be ready by 6 a.m. the next day, 100% precision is often not humanly possible. A computer can work 24 hours a day, but a translator can't—especially if he or she has already put in a 10-hour day. This is a common point of failure for fast and cheap translations (known in the trade as "fast food" translations). Experienced translators know to stay away from this type of assignment, since the result will often be less than perfect, especially if the customer is planning to forego the costs of proofreading in the interests of even greater economy. Another symptom: an excellent translation of about the first 50 pages (depending on the translator's stamina), then all of a sudden, the first spelling errors show up (often in inflectional endings that the translator's spell checker can't detect, because in certain situations, these endings are OK), then some translated words that weren't double-checked, but just rendered one by one. Later there will be sentences without subjects or predicates—then finally, the icing on the cake: entire passages that weren't translated at all.

We maintain that every translation needs to be reviewed by another translator who is a native speaker of the target language. (We let the customer decide whether to have us do this, or engage his own proofreader.) When a translation needs to be done very quickly, it is especially important to have someone proofread it with care.

- **"It'll do."**

This is an attitude typical of people who overestimate their linguistic abilities. One can see it with some writers who are convinced that they can do the translation themselves, because at one time they had studied the language in school. Even a very competent translator with a certificate in translation cannot write as well as a native. A native speaker may not be able to say whether a passage was correctly translated or not, but he may often have a "feeling" that something is just not right,

without being able to say exactly why. Sometimes the translation is done by "feel." This is a common problem for new translators, and one that they need to overcome in order to become really good at translation. Sometimes a translator takes out a dictionary and uses the first plausible match.

It is also risky if the translator is not on top of the topic at hand—whether it is because he is not sufficiently versed in the subject matter (he probably won't admit that to the customer)—or whether the customer, who knows the product and the subject thoroughly, doesn't offer enough background information about the nature of the product, or how it looks, or how it works. This often happens unconsciously, when the customer does not realize that the translator may not necessarily know the subject matter, which has been second nature to the customer for years, as well as he does.

The Internet is often a helpful source of reference material. But when the subject is of a confidential nature, so that the information provided is minimal and tightly circumscribed, severe misunderstandings may result, leading to an unfair evaluation of the translator's abilities.

One often underestimates how a word in another language may have 10 possible meanings, depending on the context, the intent, or the form, e.g. the German word "Motor" can represent an electric motor, an internal combustion engine, or a servo, etc.) Producing the best possible translation requires having as much reference material at hand as the original author had.

- **An automatic or literal translation**

Especially when it comes to selling a product or creating exactly the right impression with a reader, the translator needs to be given free rein to use his creativity. The rule is $S + D = T$ (where S stands for the source text, D for dictionaries, thesauruses, or glossaries of some sort, and T for the translated output.) It is still a commonly held opinion that by replacing each single word with one from a foreign language, the result will be the equivalent of a decent translation. That is why today we have "translation software" that translates one word after another, with an algorithm for performing the cleanup. Still, the result produced by this kind of software is often unsatisfactory.

The customer has to decide what matters to him. Is it important to reproduce the exact sentence structure, at the risk of producing material that sounds foreign, or is it better to allow the translator license to exercise his creativity and produce a work of art, rather than a "copy"? A translator cannot make a decision to add or remove words or passages, but simply by having the freedom to reformulate a sentence, he can sometimes work wonders, especially when it comes to localization.

- **Not paying attention to length**

Ideally, a translated text should be reviewed one more time by an Internet specialist who knows the target language. The following areas merit special consideration: Titles, keywords, buttons, text length, and dynamically created pages, in general. Details of this sort are beyond the realm of translation, and actually within that of page design, for the goal should be for every single page to look just like a page produced in the target country.

Building a multilingual website requires more dedication than simply quickly translating a few lines of text. If a foreign-language website is to have the same effect on a reader as the original, so that it distinguishes itself from the competition, what is required is not just a lot of work, but a certain measure of artistic ability. But it is worth the effort, when there is a real desire to capture the targeted reader's attention, and keep him from moving on to another website.