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Localisation and website design

Stephen Crabbe and Victoria Sharvill have researched the importance of localisation in website design.

Most readers of Communicator will have heard of localisation and the localisation industry. This is not surprising when we consider that the localisation industry has been in existence since the 1970s and has evolved from being a small, specialised sector of the language business into the fourth fastest-growing industry in the United States (Jiménez-Crespo 2013). Yet, it would probably be difficult to reach a consensus among readers as to what constitutes either localisation or the localisation industry. For example, some readers might believe that localisation is akin to translation, others that it goes beyond translation and is akin to cultural adaptation, while others that it is akin to internationalisation.

Similarly, the localisation industry includes multiple segments (for example: website localisation, software localisation, video game localisation and multimedia localisation) that are all closely interrelated yet discrete. The largest segment is currently website localisation, although it is worth noting that the ongoing growth in the popularity of smartphones and tablets may affect this in the future. While it is difficult to get precise figures for the increase in volume of business for localising smartphones and tablets themselves, the mobile app industry is widely predicted to see a 14% growth rate for 2012–2017 in paid-for downloads alone, much higher than, for example, the video game and software industries which are predicted at 8.1% and 4.8% growth rates, respectively (Columbus 2013; Stamford 2014; Warman 2014).

This article will thus discuss and attempt to define localisation, looking in particular at website localisation and the importance of cultural preferences in website design.

Defining localisation

The origin of the word ‘localisation’ may help some readers to understand it better. It is derived from the noun ‘locale’, which is an area with a shared sociocultural and linguistic background. Industry definitions of localisation tend to reflect this origin of the word. For example, the Globalization & Localization Association (GALA) – a professional association that promotes localisation – defines it on their website as:

> the process of adapting a product or content to a specific locale or market. Translation is only one of several elements of the localization process. [...] The aim of localization is to give a product the look and feel of having been created specifically for

It is clear from this definition that, first, localisation goes beyond translation and that, second, calls for considerations that go beyond the linguistic. These ideas are also reflected in other definitions and characterisations of localisation:

- It is a process of adaptation as opposed to translation (Ishida & Miller 2005).
- The target audience of a localised product or service is defined by ‘locale’ (LISA 2003: 13).
- A localised product or service meets 'language and cultural requirements’ (SAS Institute 2009: 653) or at least is appropriate to the target locale (Esselink 2003).
- Localisation encompasses many cultural features of a product beyond the linguistic, such as graphics and colour (LISA 2003), user interface adaptations and encoding (SAS Institute 2009) and date/time formats and currencies (GALA 2015).
- A localised product or service should be accepted as being ‘native’ (Watkins, Williams & Weis 2002: 4) to the target audience. It seems, at least from the above definitions, that localisation is not akin to either translation or internationalisation; rather it is akin to cultural adaptation of which one stage in the process is translation. However, this does not mean that the matter is necessarily settled. Readers who are also interested in translation issues might find on exploring definitions of translation that, like definitions of localisation, they are not fixed or stable. By way of example, Pym (2004) draws attention to the fact that some recent translation theorists view localisation as translation evolving for a new technological era.

Website localisation and design

Website design is an integral part of website localisation and many studies have been undertaken into the effect of website design on encouraging consumers to visit and stay loyal to a company online (Cheng 2000; Cyr, Ilsever, Bonanni & Bowes 2004; Cyr & Trevor-Smith 2004; Kim & Fesenmaier 2008; Cyr, Head & Larios 2010). This is particularly the case for travel and tourism companies as O’Connor (2004) points out, digital access to advertising has the potential to be important to the travel and tourism industry because the dynamic and intangible nature of travel and tourism products makes them ideal for selling through the Internet. Yet, the 2004 study undertaken by
Cyr, Ilsever, Bonanni & Bowes revealed that the number of customers actually booking holidays online was low, with poorly designed websites lacking culturally appropriate, localised features cited as a large limiting factor. So what features of website design can be localised to entice individuals to purchase from and stay loyal to a company online?

In order to answer this, it should first be made clear that the design of a website is a combination of multiple features such as:
- Content
- Information architecture
- Graphic design
- Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
- Navigability
- Usability (O’Connor 2004: 226)

There are two distinct schools of thought on the relative importance of these individual features: the aesthetics (presentation) approach to web design versus the functionality (layout) approach. However, O’Connor (2004), and more recently Cyr (2014), point out that website designers tend to opt for a blend of these two approaches.

It is, however, perhaps surprising to find that the impact of cultural preferences on website design has traditionally had far less focus than aesthetics and functionality. Yet, research into websites in Germany, Japan and the U.S. by Cyr & Trevor-Smith in 2004 and Cyr, Head & Larios in 2010 found clear differences in layout and colour preferences depending on culture. Interestingly, Cyr, Ilsever, Bonanni & Bowes suggested in 2004 that the homogeneity of website design was inevitable in the increasingly globalised online environment. However, Cyr has more recently (2014) made clear that this is no longer likely to be the case with users preferring website designs consistent with their locale.

Cultural adaptation of websites
The argument for culturally adapted websites thus seems to be strong. Certainly, reference to Cyr (2014) reveals that multiple studies since the 2000s have shown that web users consistently prefer websites designed for their locale over homogeneous international websites. So what features of a website can be localised? Singh & Pereira (2005: 11–16) propose five levels of localisation.

1. Standardised websites:
   In this category, websites undergo no cultural adaptation and the same web content is provided in one language for all users. Perhaps surprisingly, a study by Singh in 2012 found that over half of the websites of companies on Forbes 900 were in this category.

2. Semi-localised websites:
   In this category, websites undergo the least amount of cultural adaptation. This is often little more than the provision of contact information for different locales.

3. Localised websites:
   In this category, locale-specific websites are provided. However, the localisation is mostly linguistic with minimal design changes.

4. Highly localised websites:
   In this category, the localisation goes beyond linguistic to the cultural adaptation of front-end features such as country-specific URLs, preferred time, date and number formats and so on. This level of localisation was found by Singh (2012) to be present in less than a third of the websites of companies on Forbes 900.

5. Culturally customised websites:
   In this category, a website is adapted to completely match the culture of the target locale. Singh and Pereira (2005) suggest that the website closest to being in this category is the IKEA website.

It would be interesting to know if any readers are aware of other websites that they would categorise as being in or close to the final category.

Summary
To conclude, we hope this article has shown that defining localisation or the localisation industry is complicated. Part of this complication arises from the fact that there is no single type of localisation or single localisation industry. Nevertheless, we hope that we have gone some way towards helping readers improve their understanding of localisation as well as shown the importance of cultural preferences in the localisation of website design.

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