Chapter I

Internet Multilinguality: Challenges, Dimensions, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

In the hay-days of the Internet boom, most software packages used on the Internet were in English, as were most Web sites and search engines. Since 2000, however, there have been more non-English-speaking users than English-speaking users on the Internet. Besides this language issue, there are other important issues involved in multilinguality on the Internet: cultural, technological, political, and legal issues. This chapter examines three challenges of Internet multilinguality: language barriers, cultural differences, and technological difficulties. This chapter also provides three recommendations for overcoming barriers created by language, culture, and technology.

INTRODUCTION

Since its creation in the United States in 1969, the Internet has evolved from the then monolingual DARPA NET into a World Wide Web, with an increasing multilinguality of more than 1,000 languages (Crystal, 2001a). In the hay-days of the Internet boom, most software packages used on the Internet were in English, the vast majority of Web sites were in English, and search engines were also mostly in English (Crystal, 2001b). Nowadays, multilinguality has become an important aspect of the Internet, which would have an indispensable impact on anyone that is involved in online communication over the Internet and the Web. As the result, the Internet has made it possible for Web users to access more information in various languages more efficiently than ever before. Since 2000, there have been more non-English-speaking users than English-speaking users on the Internet (Global Reach, 2004). This trend towards multilingualization of the Internet is not surprising at
all, because 92% of the world’s population speaks a primary language other than English. Besides the language issue, there are other important issues involved in multilinguality on the Internet: cultural, technological, political, and legal issues (Hillier, 2003; Hopkins, 2000; Yunker, 2003). This chapter will first address three challenges of Internet multilinguality—language barriers, cultural differences, and technological difficulties—and then address three vital dimensions of Internet multilinguality—multilingual Web sites, multilingual domain names, and multilingual search engines. Also, this chapter will outline three recommendations to overcome the barriers that are created by language, culture, and technology: (1) Web site glocalization; (2) multilingual search engines, and (3) multilingual domain name. In addition, this chapter will outline the future trends for Internet multilinguality, because the triangular relationship among language, culture, and technology would continue to create new challenges for multilingual online communication.

BACKGROUND

Although it is very difficult to know the exact number of languages spoken on earth, there are 6,912 languages cataloged in the 15th edition of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, an encyclopedic reference work that tries to organize all of the world’s known living languages by continent and country (Ethnologue, 2005; Language Facts, 2006). It is estimated that 96% of these languages (around 6,600) are spoken by a mere 4% of the world’s population, and the eight most popular languages are spoken by more than half of the world’s population. These eight languages are English, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi (with Urdu), Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Bengali, and Portuguese (National Virtual Translation Center, 2006; UNESCO WebWorld, 2006). English as the most widely spoken and written language with some 300-400 million native speakers is also the most widely learned second language with 1.9 billion speakers, nearly a third of the world’s population (Wikipedia, 2006). English was also a dominant language on the Internet around 1997 when 80-85% of the Web sites were in English (Jenkins, 1997; Wallraff, 2000). In 1999, 96% of e-commerce Web sites in the .com domain were in English (The Default Language, 1999). The dominance of English on the Internet and the Web came to an end in 2000 when the number of non-English-speaking Internet users surpassed that of English-speaking Internet users (Global Reach, 2004). In 2001, the State of the Internet Report produced by the U.S. Internet Council and the International Technology & Trade Associates (ITTA) found that native-English speakers represented approximately 45% of the online population. As a matter of fact, more and more non-English-language Web sites were developed to meet the rising needs of the majority of the non-English-speaking customers on the Internet. For example, the Yahoo! France and Yahoo! Japan Web directories have been credited as the early successful efforts that resulted in the increasing of the numbers of French and Japanese-speaking Internet users (Jenkins, 1997). At the end of 2002, more than half of America’s 100 largest companies had developed their multilingual Web sites (Tongues of the World, 2002). Since then, major companies have been moving steadily to multilingualizing their Web sites. For instance, Siemens, which sells products in more than 190 countries, has more than three dozen Web sites in more than 40 languages. DaimlerChrysler sells in more than 200 countries, with 28 Web sites in more than 20 languages. Furthermore, at the end of 2005, the English-speaking Internet population dropped to 30.6%, while the non-English-speaking Internet population increased to 69.4% (Internet World Stats, 2006). Besides English, the other most popular languages on the Internet are Chinese (13.0%), Japanese (8.5%), Spanish (6.3%), German (5.6%), French (4.0%), Korean (3.3%), Portuguese (3.2%), Italian (2.8%), and Russian (2.3%). Obvi-