JEFF ALLEN WRITES:

Localisation: coarse or fine-grained?

One of the recent points of interest in the localisation field has been about the extent of localisation with respect to regional and local varieties of a given language. For example: Continental French versus North American French; Tunisian French versus Quebecois French. Is it necessary to always localize into a specific language variety or is it possible to use one "universal" type variety per group of language varieties?

There are not many written accounts that discuss localization issues on the differences between the languages varieties. Of what can be found on this topic, some specialists consider such varieties to be dialects of an umbrella language (for example: Quebecois French, Tahitian French, Belgian French, Moroccan French, and others are all local varieties of a language called French) whereas others consider them to be separate languages in themselves (Quebecois French is a language, Tahitian French is a language, Belgian French is a language, etc).

One approach is identifying and using a localization pan-language which acts as a representative of the group of its members.In some cases, there is already a representative variety that dominates and might be considered as a default variety, such as Standard French for French-speaking countries.This type of case is usually possible in contexts with longstanding historical issues, as is the case with Standard French being supported by the French Academy.

In other cases, however, the situation is different. What we all refer to as the Spanish language is spoken in over a dozen countries in both hemispheres.If a customer requests to localize their product into a single target Latin American Spanish variety because the product will sell in two different countries on two continents, the localization process can become quite an undertaking (MARTIN, Patrice. A localization project taking into account the varieties of Latin American Spanish. To appear in MultiLingual Computing & Technology, Issue 42. Summer 2001).

It is essential to work with the client and the end users in the target countries concerning the standardization of terminology and vocabulary because of the differences per region that need to be merged into a unified terminology in a single localized product.This approach seems to be more or less feasible for what are referred to as major international languages. On the other end of the spectrum are languages that must be specifically localized in terms of grammar and vocabulary per locale.Take for example the language name "Creole" which actually refers to a group of over 50 different language varieties that are spoken in a few dozen countries and territories throughout the world. Since creoles do not all share the same lexical base (some creoles are French-based, some English-based, some Spanish-based, some Portuguese-based Creoles, some German-based, etc), the first step is categorizing a creole according to its lexical base (MASON, Marilyn and Jeff ALLEN. 2001.

Is there a Universal Creole for Localization Efforts? Localization Industry Standards Association Quarterly Newsletter. Vol. X, No. 3. August 2001). Even within a group of creoles of the same lexical base, one French-based creole has a number of orthographic and grammatical differences that prevent its written form from being fully understandable for speakers of other French-based ones. Differing orthographic conventions between each specific local variety are not trivial and must also be respected.

An underestimation of the number of varieties contained within the language name "Creole" was disastrous for a translation/localization job that suffered from the lack of specificity and effective communication throughout the supply chain of the translation vendors. The resulting translated text was announced as a "Creole hoax" in 1999 on several information and discussion lists (http://linguistlist.org/issues/10/10-1812.html#1).

The error in the communication process of this so-called hoax was due to people throughout the workflow chain not asking a basic question (Which variety of the language?) which localizers are beginning to ask more and more.The intended target language was one specific French-based creole variety (Haitian Creole) whereas the final translated document was produced in a different English-based variety (Jamaican Creole).

When the different players in the communication chain do not adequately specify their request, it is not surprising that such mistakes occur.Another foreseeable pitfall for future localization jobs might be Quecha since there are over 40 different non-mutually intelligible local varieties of Quechua spoken in South America (CONSTABLE, Peter. 2001. Working with Language Identifiers.Multilingual Computing & Technology, Vol. 12, Issue 4, p. 68). There are cases where each language variety can be considered as a language in itself when

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country-specific language policy institutions are involved (PELLET, Mercedes. One company's experience learning how to localize for various Latin American countries. To appear in MultiLingual Computing & Technology, Issue 42. Summer 2001). However, there are clients who often also ask for a single target language version to be prepared in a universal, pan-language variety (MARTIN. To appear, 2001).

One task of educating the client includes showing them that localization variants are not just based upon a linguistically-oriented paradigm through which we send a single template document for easy customization based on terminological differences.Localization can in fact be much more complex and is not simply a translation task. Depending on the material to be prepared, a significant number of localization issues and decisions are often based on extra-linguistic and socio-economic factors (age, gender, seniority, education level, reading/literacy level, motivation for using the product, co-existing language contexts, level of standardization, etc). For example, a training video produced by an American manufacturer will have a filmed trainer, of a given gender, probably using an informal level of language. Yet the combination of factors might not reflect the actual situation in which a localized version of the film will be used for product operators in a given target country on another continent.It might even be necessary to reproduce a film by filming a trainer from the target culture, speaking with a level of language that is appropriate for the learners, etc.

In conclusion, the question of fine-grained or coarse-grained localisation has no pre-set answer.A number of linguistic as well as extra-linguistic factors must be thoroughly investigated and considered for making such a decision to localize into each specific language variety or to aim for producing a localized product using a pan-language variety. In either case, it is important to undertake a complete background study of the issues that will affect the acceptance, readability and usability of the localized versions of information to be produced. ■