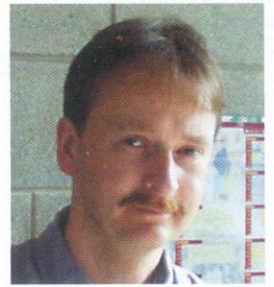


Reinhard Schäler

Reverse localization



"A trendy Web site in France will have a black background, while bright colors and a geometrical layout give a site a German feel. Dutch surfers are keen on

video downloads, and Scandinavians seem to have a soft spot for images of nature," wrote Ben Vickers in the European edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, reporting on the EU-funded Multilingual Digital Culture project.

The result of this kind of adaptation effort – largely followed by mainstream localization efforts – is that a program or web page sends out all the right signals to the user, something like a chameleon. But in many cases, users know and most of all feel that something is not quite right because no matter how much you change the color of a website, the hand signals, the symbols and the sounds, the *content* will remain the same.

The approach, also advocated by cultural adaptation guru Geert Hofstede and his followers, leads to a cultural dilemma. When you travel to Spain, do you really want to find out from a web-based, localized US travel guide where to eat in Barcelona, Santiago, Madrid or Seville? Or when you travel to the Middle East, read up on the history of the region on a localized US web page? Sadly, this is what you will most likely be offered when you search the web for this kind of information.

The accidental localizer

Like travel writer Macon Leary in Anne Tyler's book *The Accidental Tourist*, who hates both travel and anything out of the ordinary, many e-content publishers dislike diversity, difference and divergence from standards, which make their lives more difficult and their projects more expensive. They create websites that are acceptable to every global citizen's taste, beliefs and customs, with no surprises and no deviation from the norm and with an almost clinical feel of global political over-correctness to them.

Macon Leary needed Muriel, a deliciously peculiar dog-obedience trainer, to end his insular world and thrust him headlong into a remarkable engagement with life. Local content producers and local cultures need technical experts to bring their content to the world so



Coca-Cola websites: South Africa, China and India. Designers try to reflect the cultural preferences of local target audiences.

that the world can enjoy the different perspectives and approaches offered by them. What is needed is more local content and better access to this content, not more localization of content originating from a single culture.

It remains to be proven how successful and appropriate current approaches to cultural adaptation are. But indicators suggest that an adaptation strategy that effectively hides the origin of digital content could at best mislead viewers to believe that what they are looking at was produced by someone with a similar value system to their own. This may reduce their level of alertness and critical reflection on the content. At worst, at least from the perspective of a digital publisher, this strategy could have a devastating effect on the saleability and commercial success of the product or service by removing what could have been its most attractive selling point: *strangeness*.

Strangeness

Many examples and lessons from international marketing strategies show how strangeness works for sales – lessons that have, surprisingly, not even been considered yet by the localization industry.

One example is association. Certain products are associated with certain countries and cultures: perfume, fashion and romance with France; technology and engineering with Germany; and sophisticated coffee drinking with Italy, which is why today one needs a dictionary to buy a coffee, or rather a macchio, latte or espresso. Strangeness, far from being a cause of disruption and chaos as suggested by Hofstede, can be a source of attraction and differentiation. It works by using existing stereotypes or by creating new ones. It works not by adapting digital content to the culture and the language of the target country but by doing exactly the opposite, using reverse localization: keeping or intentionally introducing linguistic or cultural strangeness into digital content for a particular target locale with the aim of differentiating a digital product or service from the dominating culture in that locale. **M**

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