

# Multilingual websites widen the way to a new online world

The dominance of English on the internet is set to decline as companies realise that to leverage the full value of their sites in global markets they need to approach customers in their own language, writes **Julian Perkin**

Anyone who surfs the net regularly could easily form the impression that nearly all the world speaks English. The language, it would seem, is fast becoming a *lingua franca*, with all the benefits this would bring for communication and understanding – and threats to cultural diversity and regional independence.

English is everywhere – in Hollywood films, on TV and in pop music. The vast majority of international conferences and communications for business, science, academia and other disciplines are in English.

English is typically the language of people who either come from richer nations, or is the second language used by a wealthy and influential professional elite. Hence its dominance.

As a consequence, English documents pervade the internet. Statistics vary, but the estimates suggest that around three quarters of the pages on the worldwide web are in English. Yet only 5.4 per cent – little more than 1 in 20 – of the world's population have English as their mother tongue, according to IDC, the Boston-based IT market researchers. The majority of these are Americans. A further 7 per cent of the world's population are proficient English speakers, so the language is a good means of communication for around an eighth of the world's inhabitants.

There are fractionally more native Spanish speakers in the world, and the Chinese languages dwarf English as a native language, spoken by 20.7 per cent of the world population. Three-quarters of these, or 15 per cent of the world population, speak Mandarin alone – nearly three times as many people as have English as a first language.

The pre-eminence of English in other fields may be unassailable, but on the internet at least, its dominance is set to decline sharply as international internet access grows and more companies and institutions around the world put their information online and start to conduct e-business.

According to research by Steve McClure at IDC, growth in web usage and e-commerce in Europe and especially in Asia will outstrip that of the US by between two and five times over the next two to three years.

IDC surveys and data from Forrester, another IT market research group, also show, not surprisingly, that the vast majority of people prefer websites in their native language, especially for leisure activities such as online shopping. Moreover, they are more likely to buy things online if they can use their own language.

GlobalSight, a consultancy firm that advises organisations on internationalising websites, estimates that, by 2003, only one third of the projected 603m internet users will be English-speaking.

LeAnn Barber of Scient, an e-commerce consultancy, says: "There is an accelerating boot-strap effect, that is, as more content becomes available in a particular language, more people use the internet, and as more people use the internet, content producers are incentivised to use the internet as a medium."

## Websites needed in many languages

Government and venture capitalist investment in infrastructure, she adds, will be required to break the cycle in which there is not enough content to attract users, and consequently not enough users to justify the creation of content.

Companies of any size wanting to leverage the internet to reach global markets, therefore, need to offer versions of their websites in each of the languages of their target markets. But Mr McClure says there is little response from those he has questioned in the US and Europe regarding their plans to make their sites multilingual.

Europe, he notes, has natural advantages over the US, since it has local linguistic skills and inherent cultural diversity. But

there is little evidence that European businesses are turning this lead to their advantage.

This may be because the problems of maintaining a multilingual website are formidable.

Translation is just the starting point. Automated translation is available for free to individual web surfers, who can use it to get rough translations. But the quality, although improving, often yields laughable results and is no good for companies wishing to post alternative-language versions of their websites. So web pages have to be translated manually, or else automated translations must be reworked and polished by skilled translators.

Computers can play a valuable role in the overall translation process, providing, for example, online bilingual dictionaries, term banks and translation memories that scan databases of similar sentences that have been well-translated previously.

Once a website is translated into a number of languages, the web's interactive nature invites customers to respond with sales queries and support issues in their own language. Each of these needs to be dealt with in that language, requiring a large number of linguistically, as well as technically, skilled staff.

Sony, which operates websites in 14 languages to market and sell its consumer products such as laptops and memory sticks, is applying technology to automate some of this unwieldy problem. "Translating and localising the website is the easy bit," says Paul Johns, marketing director for Europe, Middle East and Asia at Broadbase (formerly Servicesoft), the company employed by Sony to handle as many queries as possible without human intervention. This is known as multilingual auto-response.

Mr Johns reckons that "80 per cent of all inbound queries to a call centre or website can be dealt with through about 20 answers." The problem is that these 80 per cent of questions can

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